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Cette recherche fait état de récits d'expériences d'enseignement auprès d'élèves autochtones. Les données ont été recueillies à l'aide d'entrevues auprès des enseignants de deux collèges anglophones: Heritage College et John Abbott. Elles permettent de comprendre les comportements de ces élèves, les obstacles qui nuisent à leur rendement scolaire, les différences culturelles, le rôle de l'enseignant et les stratégies pédagogiques à mettre en oeuvre en tenant compte des milieux institutionnels.

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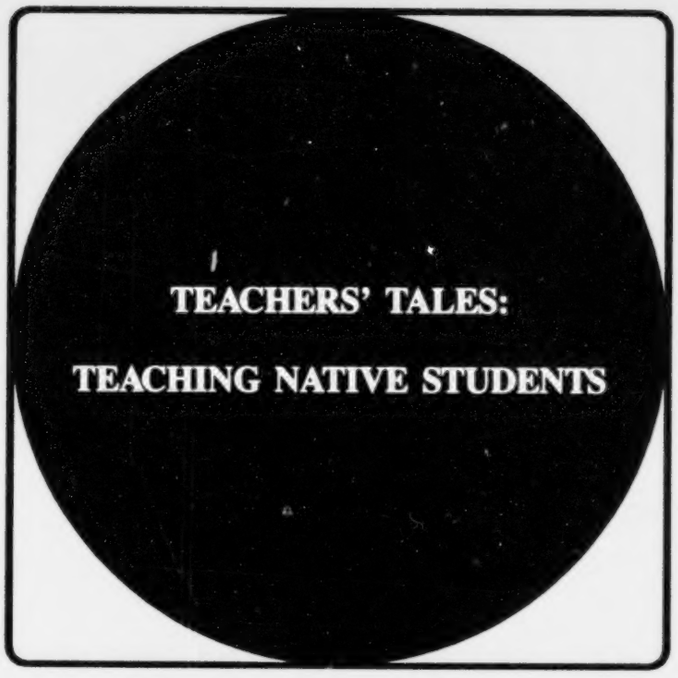

Linda Collier

John Abbott College
Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue
Québec
June 1993

Copies of this report may be obtained from the Office of the Academic Dean of John Abbott College.

9470586

TEACHERS' TALES:

TEACHING NATIVE STUDENTS

Linda Collier

John Abbott College
Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue
Québec
June 1993

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As always, I alone am responsible for the contents of this report.

Linda Collier
June 1993

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to discover, collect, select and edit "Teachers' Tales," those stories told by teachers who have taught native students.

Interviews were conducted with teachers in two colleges in Québec: Heritage College, Hull and John Abbott College, Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue. These two colleges account for most of the native students attending English-language cégeps. The interviews provided the raw data for this study.

It is hoped that the observations reported here will provide readers with real experiences on which to reflect, and thus allow them to draw their own, informed, conclusions about the most effective ways of teaching native students.

INTRODUCTION

1. Researcher's Background

I am a teacher in the Department of Humanities, Philosophy and Religious Studies in John Abbott College. I arrived in Canada from the United Kingdom in August 1971 to study at McGill University. Coming here fitted into a pattern of constant travel I had established from the age of eighteen. I celebrated my twentieth birthday in Tehran where I was working as a secretary. Iran was then ruled by the Shah, which gives you an idea that it was not yesterday. I offer this brief autobiography to you to explain my fascination with other cultures, because it served as an impelling motive for this research project.

Once here, a Brazilian exile, João, introduced me to the joys of canoeing in the Parc de la Verendrye. Since my first encounter with canoes, lakes, rivers, and the bush, I have portaged and paddled several rivers in Québec, North-West Territories and the Yukon, staggering under the weight of huge pack sacks of food and supplies for three-week trips over portages furrowed into the thin top-soil of the Canadian Shield by generations of moccasined peoples, I marvelled at the skills which had allowed them to live in such places year-round. My first big northern canoe trip in 1976 started on a lake near Schefferville from where we canoed lakes and rivers leading into the Caniapiscau, and eventually the gigantic Koksoak River before any dams had ever ineradicably changed the land. The first person we saw at our final destination, then called Fort Chimo, now Kuujjuak, was an Inuk on a 3-wheel Kawasaki. I slept in an abandoned church on a musk-ox farm that night and have been intrigued with the people of the north and their land ever since.

Thus, I began to read on the topic, take courses and eventually teach them. I have been teaching courses on native peoples on and off since 1978. I teach a course called Indian and Inuit Views, a Humanities 101. At the time of the "Oka crisis" in the summer of 1990, I had not taught this course for three or four years. I decided then and there to offer that course the next semester. At the same time, John Abbott had started to welcome aboriginal students from northern communities, so I have been fortunate to have had many of those students in my classes since then. And I have tried to involve myself in the promotion of helping to make cégeps more "native-friendly." It is in this context and spirit that I approached this subject.

2. Research Objectives

The purpose of this research was to discover, collect, select and edit "Teachers' Tales." As I wrote in my research proposal, I intended to collect stories about

their experiences told by teachers who have taught native students. These stories, I continued, would provide teachers with real experiences on which to reflect, and allow them to draw their own conclusions as to how they might best proceed in the light of the experiences of other teachers. Although the stories did not come out as I had initially envisaged, they did nevertheless emerge as teachers spoke to me about their experiences.

I thus write for teachers and from a teacher's point of view. The intended audience includes teachers who have taught native students and want to check their perceptions with others, and teachers who have not yet taught native students and are anxious to hear what others have to say. Though I write for teachers, I have constantly felt the metaphorical presence of various native students I have known looking over my shoulder to see what people are saying about them.

3. Research Topic: Why Native Students?

Contrary to some media accounts, native people in Canada are not simply another minority. The federal and provincial governments recognize their special place in the social fabric. They alone have made treaties with the Canadian government. The Constitution Act speaks to their rights in section 35 of the Charter, and the British North America Act recognized the special responsibilities of the federal government to Indians (later extended to include Inuit). The courts, too, have recognized the special rights of aboriginal peoples in many judgements.

Thomas Berger, author of the Berger Report on the anticipated effects of a gas pipeline in the Mackenzie River Valley, and an internationally acclaimed expert on indigenous peoples, reminds us of this fact in his timely book, A Long and Terrible Shadow:

> In 1992 we commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landfall and the triumph of the European enterprise in the New World. The history that we will celebrate is the history of the progress we have made. That progress has been made at the expense of the Indians; for them that history is one of suffering, of massacre, disease and devastation. Europe has cast a long and terrible shadow over the Native people of the New World. Today they are emerging from beneath that shadow, and they have a tale to tell not only of subjugation but also of survival, for they still live among us, and they have a claim on our consciences, a claim that we should honour the principles by which we profess to live (1991: xii).

Ever since missionaries first arrived in Canada, non-natives have been working on two fronts as regards education and native people. On the one hand, these

first teachers tried to inculcate into native peoples certain non-native or European-American beliefs, values and ways of doing things. On the other hand, they worked very hard at abolishing, undermining and making illegal the existing aboriginal educational system. Missionaries railed against the influential and respected position of women in various Indian nations, such as the Mohawk and Montagnais, and encouraged men to treat women as inferior beings. Until 1951, provisions of the Indian Act made certain Indian ceremonies and customs illegal. Indians were jailed for maintaining their traditions and educating their children in their ways by attending such important ceremonies as potlatches - a time of feasts and giving away goods - by which many West Coast nations marked important events. Residential schools aimed primarily at separating children from their parents, grandparents and their communities, their elders, all of whom acted as their teachers. Government policies of forcibly taking away children from their homes and laws like the Indian Act stand witness to the conscious effort to halt native education in their language, ways of doing, being, feeling and thinking. We know, too, of the many cases of abuse in residential schools and can only guess at the impact that such abuse over generations has had on native people.
One should hardly find it surprising, therefore, that today, in Canada, we are more likely to meet an adolescent native male in prison than in a post-secondary institution, or that an adolescent native female is more likely to have a baby than a high-school leaving diploma.

However, since native people have been increasingly allowed to take over their own educational systems, we have been seeing some encouraging trends. To say "allowed" brings home with some force, I think, the extent to which native people have been excluded from mainstream society. For the Indian Act decreed that native education would be controlled by non-native bureaucrats. With some notable exceptions, when native control of educational institutions does exist, it stops at the end of high school. Until recently, only a handful of native students attended post-secondary institutions.

Because so few native-controlled post-secondary institutions exist, most native students attend post-secondary institutions run by non-natives. Observers have pointed to the kinds of problems they see arising from this situation. Some of the issues most often identified when we speak of native post-secondary education are as follows: low enrollment; low success rates, i.e. high failure/drop-out rates; unsuitability of programmes and course material; pressure to assimilate and consequent student unease with "losing their culture;" and homesickness. The two last points become especially important for students coming from more remote areas, as do many of those enrolled in the two colleges in this study.

The aboriginal students in our classes now represent the hopes of their communities; they are the future leaders of those communities, their spokespersons, guardians and caretakers to be.

4. Research Locations: The Two Colleges

Heritage College in Hull stands in cramped quarters just down the road from the Museum of Civilization and enjoys beautiful views over the Outaouais River, taking in Parliament Hill. Everyone looks forward eagerly to moving into the new quarters on which building has commenced. The college registered about 800 regular students in 1992-3. Of those, fifty-five in the fall of 1992 and sixty-nine in the winter of 1993 are native, mostly Algonquin and Cree. Most of these are enrolled in either the social science or business administration programme. Since the fall of 1990 an Aboriginal Students Advisor has worked with these students. She is paid on a part-time basis, though anyone who visits the college, as I did, soon sees that she works far longer hours than the appellation suggests. Until the creation of this position, no official programme existed for aboriginal students. Certain teachers, however, added to their already heavy workload the voluntary tasks of acting as mentors and counsellors for these students.

John Abbott College, in a more bucolic setting, shares a campus with McDonald, the agricultural institution of McGill University in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue; it also enjoys river views, with a vista of the St. Lawrence. In 1992-3, about 4,750 students registered as day-time students, of whom about sixty in Fall 1992 and forty in Winter 1993 were aboriginal.

John Abbott has not one, but several programmes involving native students. The Kativik School Board runs its own programme for Inuit students within the college. This programme relies heavily on English-second-language and study-skills training in the students' first year at college to enable them to function independently in the ensuing semesters. As well, Kativik provides residences and counsellors for its Inuit students.

The James Bay Nursing Project (JBNP) began in the fall of 1990 in response to the arrival of ten Cree women in the nursing programme the previous semester. Their arrival radically changed the usual composition of the new intake as they made up one-third of the class. Two counsellors work full-time to support the students and their teachers, as well as to identify areas where the curriculum should be enriched to better respond to the needs of the communities and their future Cree nurses. Since the arrival of these first Cree students, others have registered at John Abbott, mostly in the social science programme. The counsellors of the James Bay Nursing Project concern themselves with all Cree students, not just those enrolled in the nursing programme. No programme exists for the Mohawk and occasional MicMac, Métis or other native students who attend the college.

At the same time, the Continuing Education Department administers the provision of two nursing up-grading programmes: one taking place in Kuujjuak, Ungava Bay, and another in Akwesasne. These programmes were established at the request of the communities. Akwesasne, a Mohawk reserve near Cornwall, straddles Quebec, Ontario and New York state. Several Mohawks here had received training as nursing assistants, and the community wanted them to receive instruction so they could become registered nurses and work in the new hospital and old people's home. They requested John Abbott to provide the necessary upgrading courses. This is being done through the Continuing Education Department and the teachers travel to the community for almost all classes. Thirteen students were involved in this programme for the year 1992-93.

Similarly, the Continuing Education Department is providing the educational services necessary for Inuit nursing assistants in Kuujjuak to qualify as registered nurses. So far, these courses, too, have been given on site. In the fall of 1992, six students followed these courses; the number increased to eleven in the winter of 1993.

5. Research Methods

The objectives and methods of this research fit firmly into the qualitative paradigm. Readers may find a more detailed account of methodology in the Appendix. Briefly, though, I conducted interviews with twenty-three teachers at John Abbott, and nine at Heritage College. The length of the interviews varied from a rare thirty minutes to an equally rare two-and-a-half hours. Most lasted about an hour. Teachers came from a variety of disciplines. These interviews are the data on which this research is based. I selected and categorized that data in order to produce this report, which reflects the issues and concerns of which the participants spoke.

6. The Structure of This Report

I have organized this report in a way that I hoped would help teachers (or any other readers) to look through the eyes, as it were, of teachers of native students. Chapter 1, **Setting the Scene**, gives the reader an idea of the prevailing atmosphere in which the interviews were conducted, and some of the teachers' preoccupations. Chapter 2, **Seeing the Students**, shows what teachers told me they see as they look out on their (native) students. Many teachers spoke to me of noticing particular behavioural characteristics somewhat different from those of non-native students. Someone coming new to teaching native students, or indeed, a teacher with experience of it, could take some comfort in knowing that what they notice about these students is what many other teachers see too. Beware, however, of imagining that all native students act in a particular way. They do not. The teachers interviewed state that again and again, and I try to

post warnings at regular intervals and use techniques like inserting the word "most" or "many" before "native students," or more lengthily, note that teachers "have noticed a tendency for." I worry deeply about a study of this nature creating or nurturing stereotypes. I think of the native students I have taught, and their faces and characters keep leaping into my mind to remind me of their individuality. Nonetheless, overwhelmingly, teachers talked to me of how they had noticed native students, on the whole, to be quiet, not engage in much eye contact, to sit together and so on, as you will read.

Chapter 3, **Processing Information**, explores the fascination and obfuscation which occurs at the intersection of two cultures. The teacher sees, but how does she process what she sees? For images, perceptions, attitudes and beliefs all leap into action between our eyes and our understanding. How does the teacher understand what he has seen? This section reports ways in which two worlds can misunderstand each other when they meet.

Chapter 4, **Posing Questions,** shows how many teachers, realizing the extent and depth of cultural differences between the native and non-native worlds, pose themselves questions. "What are we doing?" they wonder as they contemplate the task, and "Who do we think we are?" Others, or sometimes even the same teachers, see their task as one of empowering their native students. Many teachers wondered whether they should treat native students differently from other students. Perhaps our attempts to accommodate native students will lead to a teaching revolution!

Chapter 5, **Seeking Strategies,** deals with the strategies many teachers spoke of using to adapt their teaching to the native students. A fair number of participants discovered that any changes they made to their teaching had made them a better teacher for all their students. The fact of having native students in colleges leads to demands for recognition of their needs in both teaching methods and in course content. Teachers interviewed made many interesting comments on these topics.

Teachers act within an institutional context, of course. Chapter 6, **Institutional Context,** addresses this issue. Teachers spoke of issues and concerns relevant to the different institutions. For example, the two colleges where this study took place differ radically in size. Probably this size difference leads to different ways of dealing with issues, and is compounded by the difference in the proportion of native students. Each, too, has different programmes for native students.

Finally, I present the reader with not so much the conclusions as some of the implications of this study, which brings us back to the beginning again. Acknowledging and agreeing with the urgings of several participants I offer no recipes: there can be no manual on how to teach aboriginal students.

If a study like this does not aim to produce recommendations and does not pose as a kind of study guide for teachers of native students, what then is its purpose?

The purpose is to reflect back to educators how they see a particular part of their world. In one sense, it stands in the stead of conferences and study groups and in another sense, it replaces the gossip of the Teachers' Room. For by reading this, teachers can hear what others say, can imagine for themselves a kind of dialogue where one tells their colleague about something that happened in class, or with a particular student, and "I can't make it out," or "I'm not quite sure how to handle it. What do you think?" And so we learn from each other through an exchange of ideas and information.

CHAPTER I. SETTING THE SCENE

Teachers entered the room where I conducted interviews with their own agendas, just as I had mine. "It's good to talk about these things with a colleague," was a sentiment I thoroughly reciprocated. Several colleagues commented to me along these lines: "I appreciate the time for me to even think through my ideas about these students; what I'm doing with them." Many initiated discussion by informing me that they had nothing much to say. But, of course, teachers make their living by explaining and expounding ideas, so all ended up by providing useful information, despite their initial hesitations. A few made clear to me their reservations. These covered a variety of topics. Participants most often cited their concern with how any report on the topic would be used. It should not single out native students as "problematic" nor feed the fires of stereotypes. One cannot properly speak of "native students" as a category of students, emphasized several teachers, speaking not only of the variety of cultures but also of the individualism of each student. And, above all, several warned me, no-one can write a "how to" book about teaching native students.

1. Teachers' Reactions to Teaching Native Students

I started conducting my interviews just before the referendum on the question of the latest constitutional proposals. Canadians rejected these proposals which included, for the first time ever, provision for aboriginal self-government. As one participant put it to me, as he grappled to make meaning of the experience of teaching native students:

> Maybe this is the experience of the whole nation...We must find a way of being with each other in a different way. Maybe a new metaphor is required.

Many teachers made general remarks about their attitude to teaching native students, ranging from delight at teaching particular classes, through remarking that they find teaching native students interesting but hard work, to pointing out the need to be more sensitive and, on a more philosophical plane, posing questions about what it is we are doing.

One participant informed me right at the start of the interview that: "I have nothing but positive stories." I wondered if I had inadvertently and incorrectly given the impression that I sought negative stories? Or maybe, she wanted to warn me that, as someone else pointed out: "When people are different from us, we tend to see them negatively. I think very often they [native students] are perceived as not trying, not - it's always the negative."

Such is obviously not the case for this participant - a teacher in a non-classroom activity - who gives full rein to her enthusiasm:

> So it's a pleasure to teach them...it's always nice when you get an influx of talented students...I like them. I find that they're fun to work with as a group of students, and they're keen. I've taught many native students of varying degrees of aptitude, and my experiences have certainly all been positive.

Several participants, while pointing out how exciting and gratifying they find teaching native students, mentioned that especially in mixed groups: "It takes a lot of energy."

While a number of teachers have a hard time making sense of what their role should be vis-à-vis native students, many of these same teachers also find the presence of aboriginal students provides an exciting stimulus:

> I see a group of people who are at a very rich and exciting moment in time and I like to see those students aware and feeling that there is a future. I think that's really important.

Others feel more ambivalent, though. While appreciating the cultural difficulties many native students face at college, and sympathizing with them, this participant feels "kind of cut off."

> I find distance - there's a real distance there. A gap. You can understand theoretically perhaps what they're going through, but it's very hard to empathize, to really feel...They're very unrevealing to you, so it's hard to break through that shell.

Many participants related areas of puzzlement during their interviews, but an overwhelming number interjected in very positive terms their overall experience with native students.

> I have to let a...lot of my preconceived ideas go...The other students are so inured with what we expect of them, in a way, that I find I spend a lot of time trying to break that down and trying to get them to respond in a more honest way. But these students, they don't have that sort of jargon. And that's good in a way...And I find it teaches you a lot about yourself because you say, "Now what do I want? Am I supposed to be teaching the formula for success? This is how [you do it]." You really do want an original sort of response from these students.

This juxtaposition of professional bemusement coupled with a delight in what they learn from the students comes through in another teacher's interview, where, after despairing that he cannot tell what native students are thinking, he tells how native students hand in work commenting on their own lives: "And so it's fascinating. I'm delighted with it. It's really great stuff. I'm really getting an education."

After relating his experience with native students, a particularly up-beat one, another teacher wonders why his relationship with his class of native students differs from that with his other classes:

> A couple of the girls were crying. They're very sensitive, very emotional. They were saying, "We're not going to see you any more." I don't have that relationship with my regular students. This is a different type of relationship. Maybe it comes from their tradition - that I have given them knowledge, and they don't want to be cut off from me...It's not just that I've done my job and that's it.

Other teachers made a point of telling me what they have learnt from the native students, like this participant, who has not only learned how to look at things differently, but also a different way of learning.

> I have to say that what I've learned from the native students is a way of looking at things that's different. And I can learn by precedent and example - they would never say explicitly whatever they're thinking, but rather just by their telling me things about themselves. Perhaps because I needed to hear some of those things.

Several noted, for example, the native attitude to older people. Unlike mainstream society which tends to isolate and denigrate, or dispense with, members of society as they grow older, the native people respect them, and enjoy them. This attitude influenced teachers' perceptions, as noted by one teacher:

> I began to look at old age differently. And I think, once again, I have to thank the native students for that because they really listen to old people, they really want to hea. what they have to say.

Many teachers then, find teaching native students a task that is rewarding and exciting as well as challenging, and at times frustrating.

2. The Problem of Generalizations

Even more than John Abbott teachers, Heritage teachers emphasized their unwillingness to make generalizations about native students. I attribute much of

this to the fact that they have simply had more students so the range of behaviours is even wider. Most core and social science courses (native students enroll overwhelmingly in the social sciences) at Heritage have at least five native students in every section of around thirty to thirty-five students.

One teacher voiced her hesitations with the objective of this study, "collecting stories," because of her leeriness of generalizations.

> And I think so much of it is caught up in our world views, which are so different, so disparate that I think it's even difficult for us to come up with a vocabulary that can express those differences. And for me even to pretend that I could design an educational system that wouldn't disturb their world view or whatever would be folly...Yet we might stereotype and say, now I've got those anecdotes and I'm really beginning to understand the mind of the hunter, only to discover that it's so individualistic even with that context that there is no mind of the hunter.

We all acknowledge the problems with generalizations, and indeed the very defining term of this project "native" or "aboriginal" students masks the vast differences in native cultures. The difference between Haida and Mohawk people surely outweighs the difference between Canadians and Americans, and indeed looms larger than that between, for example, the French and the Danes.

In John Abbott College, many participants remarked on how they felt more successful with one group of aboriginal students rather than another. Teachers had little to say explicitly about teaching Mohawk in the regular day division, except to note that particular individuals had made a point of informing them that they were indeed Mohawk. Or, on occasion, teachers contrasted the apparent ease with which some of these students handled courses with the more obvious difficulties of some of the Cree and Inuit. While many Mohawks work actively to maintain their language and traditional culture, few now can claim Mohawk as a mother tongue. Mohawk students speak English as a first language and share much of the culture of the non-native students, though their apparent assimilation can be deceiving at times.

Some teachers at John Abbott compared and contrasted their experience teaching Cree and Inuit students. Most often, teachers noted how small their sample of native students was, which precluded any generalization on their part. Many pointed out that the "differences" which they had noted could most probably be attributed to other, individual or institutional (programme), factors.

As some teachers at John Abbott had pointed to what they saw as quite important differences in how successful they were with one group of native

students rather than another, I asked several teachers at Heritage if they distinguished between the two main groups of aboriginal students attending their college. Warning me that "you would be in trouble here if you mixed them up," one teacher pointed out that, whereas several Algonkians have graduated in the past, only recently have Cree started to graduate. Others, along the same lines, concurred generally with the idea expressed below:

> I don't know if it's so much whether they're Algonkian or Cree but whether they come from an urban centre like Maniwaki where they have a lot of contact with non-native people, or from a very isolated area with little contact...I think it has more to do with how much contact they've had with non-natives. The Algonkians are almost called city Indians because they have much more contact with city living. They only live one -and-a-half hours away.

Cree students live much further away than Algonkians, and have "a more difficult time adjusting to urban existence here...They come here and it's a bit of a culture shock ."

Algonkians are not Cree, Cree are not Mohawk, Inuit are not "Indians" of any description. As well, all Inuit are individuals, as are all other native people. I do not mean, by speaking of "native students" to belittle that individualism, those major differences. The art of crossing cultures lies in situating ourselves and others somewhere on the continuum between Confucius's "All people are the same," meaning we all communicate through language and all perform certain tasks, and the prevailing North American notion that each individual differs essentially from others. Individuals' behaviour differs within cultures. People respond according to their personality and life experience in different ways to the same stimulus. The culture is the on-going steady beat, and the individual behaviour the tune. Despite misgivings, we venture on with generalizations hedged around with caveats in the belief that without them we can produce little of any value in heuristic terms.

As a corollary to the discomfort teachers expressed with generalizations, many remarked that there is no one way to teach native students, hence one cannot write a how-to manual.

> If we could just write a book on this is the way they think, and therefore this is the way we <u>should</u> act or <u>can</u> teach them. When we start doing that, I think we've lost them. We've lost them to the system.

I should make one additional and important point while on the subject of generalizations. Almost all teachers hastened to explain to me in their interviews that just about anything they attributed to native students could also be

attributed to non-native students, just that it seemed truer or more so for native students.

3. The Societal Context

The above section gave the reader an indication of teachers' attitudes generally to teaching native students, and showed their distaste for generalizations on the subject. No setting of the scene could be complete, though, without a recognition of the larger societal context in which we all operate.

One of the participants with direct personal experience with racism admonished me that I must preface whatever I wrote with the fact that all of what I report takes place within a fundamentally racist society. Most other teachers did not believe racism entered their teaching situation or the school. In John Abbott, though, one participant has seen at least one client refuse the services of "that *black* (sic) [student]." Another had a non-native student complain about being "forced to work" in a small group with a native student, along with racist rationales for that position. Some aboriginal students have told Heritage teachers about being called "savages". I believe it important to record such incidents here simply because so many teachers, pointing to the multicultural composition of their college, seemed to think such incidents do not occur.

In August 1990, during the Oka crisis, Kativik, the Inuit School Board, brought down the first contingent of Inuit students to John Abbott and housed them in residences in Dorval. At the time, mobs were hassling Mohawks in Dorval while they were ferrying people and supplies to Kahnawake across the St. Lawrence. Kativik officials were concerned enough about the security of the Inuit students that they moved them to a quieter area. They had reason for concern; some Inuit students were chased by youths with baseball bats, presumably on the basis of their "native" look. Most of the Inuit students returned home without even attending their first semester of college.

In his article, "A Study of Education in Context," Richard Atleo looks at the various theories explaining why native students have failed in schools. The predominant theory today attributes student failure to their different learning style. He argues that we must look at the education of Indians (sic) from the viewpoint of a theory of context.

> This theory assumes that there is a relationship between an individual and the society in which the individual lives. If the relationship is characterized by a negative orientation of society towards that individual, then the theory of context holds that the individual will be negatively affected (1991: 107-108).

In this brief chapter, I have tried to convey some of the general atmosphere surrounding the teaching of native students. This setting of the scene should allow the reader better to interpret the next chapter where teachers talk about what they see as they look out on that scene.

CHAPTER II. SEEING THE STUDENTS

In this chapter, I report what teachers told me they notice about their native students. As throughout this research, everything you read is told from the teacher's point of view. This part comprises two sections, one dealing with behaviour and the other with comments on what the teachers perceive as obstacles to the students' academic performance.

Many teachers spoke of the different behaviour they had remarked on in their native students. Not all teachers observed all the patterns which follow, and many of those who did immediately added that their non-native students do this or that too, although perhaps not quite so much. Nevertheless, most teachers alluded to several of these behaviours and almost unanimously found native students tended to be quieter than non-natives in mixed classrooms composed of both native and non-native students.

1. Comments on Students' Behaviour

1.a Eye Contact

Much of the literature mentions this particular phenomenon: native students tend not to give much eye contact. They look down or do not look at you when they are talking to you. An Assistant Crown Attorney for the District of Kenora, Ontario, Rupert Ross, in his book Dancing With a Ghost, was deeply perturbed by his realization of how miscommunication between the two cultures contributes to the high incarceration rates of native people, and tries to provide a bridge between the two. In one chapter, he spends some time talking about how the Ojibway of northern Ontario tend to look down or away from someone asking them questions in court, and how the court personnel have translated this into a sign of "shiftiness" and generally unreliable testimony.

The many reports I read in journals of native students not making eye contact, looking down and away from the teacher, first prompted my wonderings, which eventually led to doing this research. I felt that the literature insisted on something which I was not experiencing in my classroom. In the winter semester of 1991 I taught two sections of Indian and Inuit Views (Humanities 101). Cree students counted for six of forty-three students; five Inuit, two Cree, one Mohawk and three Métis students made up one-third of the class in the other section. Some of these students sat quietly in class and did not seek eye contact with me, while others participated by speaking in small groups and eventually in the larger class too. I "felt" the active presence of students even though they did not speak in class, and had the impression that most made eye contact with me.

So I began to ask myself a series of questions: if much of the literature talked about students' lack of eye contact and quietness as "problems" in classrooms, why wasn't that the case for me? Was it because most of the articles I read related to schools on reserves or in communities whereas I work in a different setting? Was it because college students are older and a very self-selected group, more able and willing to act by our rules? Was this particular semester of native students simply different? Did it have something to do with the course material and with the length of time the students have been "down south?" (though my classes contained both first-time and more veteran students). My realization that little material existed for teachers of native students at the post-secondary level led me to propose this research to examine the experience of teachers of native students at Heritage College and John Abbott College and, I hope, provide something useful to them.

Teachers bring a variety of reflections to this issue. One cannot, most maintain,

> Talk about them all as a group...I kind of go with how their eye contact is. If they don't give me a lot of eye contact, then I don't give them a lot of eye contact. We talk looking at the floor, or the wall, or looking at my desk...I take my cue from them. And then there's just as many of them that give as much eye contact as anybody else.

Responses just about covered the entire spectrum. One teacher - an exception - responded: "They really did watch me. They are better on eye contact." Yet others had found "the eyes cast down" quite remarkable at the beginning of the college experience for certain students, especially when "looking people in the eye" counted as a communication skill necessary for the course.

Several teachers either did not mention this phenomenon, or did not consider it a problem. One of the teachers who did not consider it a problem told me the following story which is wonderfully apt.

> I know from Africa that this is considered very impolite for them to look at you or to answer you directly when you're a person of authority or a person who's entitled to respect. One of the experiences we had that really drove that home was of our maid when we were leaving - we'd had her take a secretarial course so she could find some work when we left and she was applying for a job with a real estate company...And they were interviewing Swazi girls for the position. And Swazi women don't look at people when they talk to them - they look at the ground. That's considered polite. We practiced this with her a lot, in the kitchen, pretending we were the interviewer, and making her look at us. And she got the job. And when the man called me for a reference, one of the things he said to me was: "You know, she's the only one who looked me in the face when I was interviewing her." And I thought: "How stupid of you."

> He didn't know. He hadn't bothered to find out. The man had lived in Africa all his life and hadn't bothered to find out that that's considered discourteous among the Swazis.

A teacher working in a non-classroom setting with a small group of students told me how she ensured the students looked at her by moving their heads.

> They wouldn't give you that sort of concentrated stare when someone is listening to you. They'd be looking around, or usually down. They'd look down when I was talking to them. And I...just to be a little silly, I'd move their head and say: "Look at me when you talk to me. " They laughed, because it was a hands-on situation. Not like a class when you sit at a desk...and I wasn't making fun of them.

Students commonly do not look at teachers so as to avoid being asked questions, others pointed out. Not only students, but teachers too, avoid eye contact, maintained one individual, insisting at the same time on the danger of stereotyping:

> How many times do you see students here and try to establish eye contact and find it's impossible? Even with colleagues. So it may be true that eye contact is a problem with certain native people but you find out if that's the case for individuals. And if that's the case, then you do it in a different way. You don't antagonize people - invade their private space...but there's a danger in stereotyping everybody that way.

Another teacher made a similar observation on this topic. Aware that much of the literature on teaching native students repeats the widely held belief that they look less at the teacher than non-natives, she observed:

> But I'll tell you most teachers don't get eye contact because they don't give eye contact, either. When you're not totally familiar with the situation you're in and you're feeling a bit awkward and you're dealing with a student who's also feeling awkward and shy, what teachers tend to do, I think, - and it's natural - is to ignore, basically, that person because you're in that predicament of not knowing quite how to handle it. As teachers we like to be experts, and to be competent. So we tend to work with students that we know how to handle. And those are the traditional ones who raise their hand, or smile, or have an answer, a question. And there's a relationship established very quickly. And I've heard aboriginal students say that, "The teacher ignores me." So here's the student wanting contact and not getting it.

Someone who had never noticed the lack of eye contact promised to go back and look out for it, prompting me to wonder about the stereotyping effect of my interviews and questions.

Most native students are socialized differently from non-natives, though, and one could well expect this different socialization to result in different body language, eye contact and so on. But it will differ from one individual to another, and individuals may well change over time as they become more aware of what the majority culture tends to demand, said this, and other participants.

> I think you can get into a lot of trouble by saying that they don't give eye contact, they don't wish eye contact. It's very individual, and the longer they're in our institutions, the longer the eye contact they give.

Confirming what some teachers noted, that they understand that eye contact varies from one culture to another, one remarked:

> I've talked to...students...and some of them are taught as little children, even amongst themselves, not to have a lot of eye contact. It's disrespectful, it's intruding and it sort of comes from the fact that they live close together, in close proximity...People are getting dressed, bathing in a teepee of twenty mixed people...so this idea of avoiding eye contact becomes quite important actually to allow you to maintain privacy and dignity.

In some ways, the stories of eye contact act as a metaphor for issues raised when native students attend non-native institutions. For what one culture holds respectful behaviour, the other may see as a person "being shifty", sly, unable to look me in the eye. Non-native teachers, trained in the dominant culture's signals and ways of acting, may accept, intellectually, that native people tend not to look them in the eye, yet usually find this disconcerting at some level. As teachers point out, however, students often give more eye contact over time. Is this not a sign, perhaps, of the power of non-native institutions to assimilate native people, and thus just one more of those things that teachers worry about when they ask: "What are we doing?"

1.b Silent Students

Time and again in the literature on aboriginal children in schools, one reads that their (non-native) teachers comment on how quiet these children are, and how difficult they find this quietness. Even at college - where, after all, there has been much selection - teachers at Heritage shared with John Abbott teachers the observation that, on the whole, native students are quiet in the classroom. Many teachers told me they experience this quietness as problematic. Initially some

translated it as "lack of initiative" or "laziness" until something happened to make them realize that such an interpretation was incorrect.

Before looking further at comments regarding students' quietnes, I have to spell out The Anomalous Cases. Teachers report quite amazingly different behaviour on the part of individuals in classes of only native students. Those teachers who have taught classes of only native students report that native students are not particularly quiet once they come to know and trust the teacher. Most of the students, over time, come to speak up in class; a very few remain very shy and quiet, all the while handing in excellent written work. All the teachers of such classes talked of the class as being friendly, jocular, non-threatening and responsive. One teacher, commenting on the striking difference in these students in mixed versus homogeneous groups put it this way:

> The contrast is like day and night, day and night. I mean, I've seen these students shout at each other, volunteer information, talk back and forth and get very animated if they're all in a class on their own. But the minute they're separated, they're put into a situation where they're in the minority and there's quote others from outside unquote there, all of them are very quiet, and do not talk. They're very polite and it looks like they're listening, but you have no idea what they're thinking

As well, in John Abbott, teachers remarked an apparent tendency for the Inuit students to participate more in class discussions. In Heritage, some students have spoken to very public gatherings, and several teachers noted that while most native students are quiet in class, a few are quite active politically and speak publicly.

While visiting Heritage College, I was lucky enough to be invited twice to join the monthly Friday lunch-time get-together of aboriginal students and some staff. On one of these occasions, the counsellor showed a short video, then asked for reactions. To my amazement, many of the students offered their responses, questions and comments even though the classroom was packed. But, of course, most of the people there were aboriginal - only the few teachers present were non-native and all well known to the students.

At Heritage College some of the native students have spoken in front of about three hundred students and teachers during Native Awareness Week, telling of their lives and their communities. Such a public setting frightens many people - including teachers, used to speaking in public. Many of the participants at Heritage College brought my attention to this phenomenon to show that we cannot in truth make such blanket statements about native students being very quiet and not forthcoming.

Although loathe to generalize, teachers seem to concur that native students tend to be much quieter, which may indeed be the single characteristic that non-native teachers in colleges find the most puzzling, and, indeed threatening. Accustomed to a particular cultural classroom response and body language, even experienced teachers feel relatively helpless about knowing what to do, as we see here.

> The more I think about it, the more I realize these students are so silent in class. And then...where it's just a free-for-all kind of a discussion, or small groups, maybe a debate...I find the aboriginal students are lost in those sorts of situations too. Often they're quiet or they do not take any sort of controversial position. They listen, but they look like they're feeling quite out of place. I can feel that they're feeling not quite at ease, and yet again I don't know what to do.

Interpreting their behaviour through the norms of Euro-Canadian culture would steer one hastily to wrong conclusions:

> What I normally would interpret as being different with other cultures - with white people - I'd label as being indifferent, and consequently a negative connotation with the native people. I don't make an issue of it. I see the message was given and received and interpreted in whatever way, but I'm not expecting any type of recognition from that response.

At John Abbott, time after time, participants said of their native students, that they "disappeared into the woodwork," or "faded into the walls," or with some notable exceptions, they "made themselves invisible."

At Heritage, a teacher came up with a different expression, a variation of "fade into the walls:" "They don't want to stand out, they don't want to stand out at all. They just want to blend in, blend in to the background." One teacher decried the fact that this reticence means that native students, unlike their non-native peers, will not tackle him to explain a mark, or ask him to elaborate on something covered in class.

Teachers who expect students to ask them questions, or make comments in response to what they are saying, notice that native students: "Are extremely quiet in class. I can't ever remember having a question from one of them, or having one of them interrupt to ask a question, which a lot of our students do."

Certainly native students do not fade into the walls at Heritage outside of class. Eschewing the cafeteria, they have turned the lobby into a meeting area where they spend time between classes and at lunch-time.

> Here they don't [fade into the walls]. You notice where they hang out. They hang out in the main lobby of the school. When you walk through the school what you see is people hanging around who are aboriginal students. That's what you see. The others are in the cafeteria. These students don't feel comfortable there, I think. They don't spent time in the cafeteria. They bring their food up to the main lobby and hang out there in the most visible place.

Several teachers contrasted the behaviour of their native students in their offices, or in other non-classroom settings, to that of the classroom setting. In one striking comment, a teacher points to the startling difference between the behaviour of native students in her classes as compared to their behaviour in other situations.

> I wouldn't put them in one [category] or the other. It's not a black or white thing. I have students in my classes that literally fade into the walls, do not open their mouths once. They sit in the corner, they ask nothing, they demand nothing. They come into class and won't acknowledge me, and they go out of class and never say hello. Then in my office they're a totally different person. And I respect that because some of them come with the attitude that they're there for you to talk, and them to listen. It's not their job to question you or do anything other than take notes or be in class, that's what they see as their job in education. Whereas other students...open right up and participate.

The above quotation also illustrates that teachers should not take the silence of their native students as meaning that they are not participating. They are, but in their own way.

Some students change from being initially very quiet, as they get to know the institution, the way it functions, other students and the teachers. On this note, an interesting story grew out of my interview with one teacher. At one point, he began talking about a Mohawk student with whom he engaged in considerable bantering back and forth, saying this student, "Gave as good as he got." It turned out that this was none other than a student I had taught three semesters previously, who had distinguished himself in that particularly small mixed class by being one of the two quietest students of the twenty-five. He had said nothing all term. On the final day, after class, we visited Annie's, the much frequented restaurant/bar in Ste-Anne's. As we emerged after lunch, the student turned to me and said, referring to himself and another student, "We didn't say much, did we, Miss?" Flabbergasted, I took in the longest speech he had made to me that semester.

Now my colleague spoke of him in quite other terms. We wondered about this together. Various explanations come to mind: he had grown up, and at

seventeen or eighteen, a year makes a lot of difference. He was in a professional programme where the students get to know each other much better than in the general stream, and felt more at ease; he had more experience at college - these were all factors that came to mind. With other students too, we usually see that they change as they become more used to the environment, other students and their teachers.

Another teacher owned to some confusion on the issue of whether students were quiet or not. She pointed out:

> So far this semester, I have found that most of the Inuit students tend to participate verbally and be quite active. By the end of the semester, three of them talk as much or more than most of the non-natives. And while the Cree students I have known have tended to be very quiet in class, several of them have chosen to do presentations.

Most participants commented that native students never caused any disruption in the classroom, some comparing their stillness with those of non-natives who shuffle feet, chatter to next-door neighbours, move constantly. This observation points to a different way of interpreting the "quietness" which teachers find difficult. If we take this behaviour and look at it from another angle, we can see that, unlike many non-native students, native students have a remarkable ability to listen and watch attentively. No teacher recounted incidents of native students trying to disrupt or dominate the class, or in some way using the classroom situation and other students to further their own personal needs; we do, though, often see this kind of behaviour in non-natives.

Native students may well tend to be quieter, and when there are many of them in the class, teachers may find that class rather laborious, but this lack of verbal participation does not mean that they are inattentive.

> It's very difficult to teach [that] course...because I almost have to talk to myself because of the lack of participation there. It's not because they are not interested; as I said, the best paper I've had in that course is from a native student.

When we examine why so many teachers report the quietness of their native students, several explanations come to mind. One theory emphasizes the cultural congruity of quiet behaviour in a learning situation. Native Americans generally learned by watching. Asking questions was discouraged. I am reminded of an Inuk woman speaking of how to bring up little children, saying that at first they ask questions, and you answer them politely, but hope they will soon grow out of this. Along the same lines, one participant remarked: "Native students, some of them, feel as if they don't want to say anything until they have

something to say." This is unlike the dominant Euro-Canadian culture which encourages volubility and shrinks from silence, she added.

Much of the literature devotes itself to this phenomenon: the native ways of learning emphasize active listening, active watching, modelling and reflection. Yet, as more than one teacher explained, this tendency to be quiet may well change over time. Moreover, one of these teachers made the comment that, if teachers find this behaviour a problem, they should look to themselves to discover why.

> "I think it's very threatening to students and teachers when aboriginal students don't speak out: "What are they thinking?" we wonder. Why aren't we wondering what all of our students are thinking? So I think there's a kind of preoccupation because it seems a threat.

Another participant noted that there are always exceptions, particularly among the politically active native students, who are "more outspoken, more outgoing, more expressive, they have got no fear." Another participant points out that this quietness in class may very well not be culturally determined.

> But there is this lack of oral participation and dialogue with native people, something which is contrary even to what I have come to understand is their way of doing things "back home."

Some observers blame the alien nature of the classroom, something which some of the teachers in the two colleges addressed. Not only is the classroom alien, but the colleges as institutions and society at large can give little comfort to many native students.

Few things about life down south are familiar: buses, food, notions of time, community and so on. Students not only attend an alien educational institution, but do it in an alien culture. This takes its toll, and teachers know that students suffer incredible homesickness. Teachers spoke of their students saying things, like: "We've got to get a college up there. This is so difficult coming here. For me, the longer I'm away, the harder it is to reintegrate when I go home. I feel like I don't belong anywhere."

Or we hear poignant comments like those made by some of my students after watching a documentary Cree Hunters of the Mistassini (on Cree life around Mistassini). For instance, an Inuk student wrote:

> The thing that strikes me most is the people helping each other and working hard to survive. The film made me think that I am not only losing my culture while I'm in school, but I am losing my sense of closeness with my family.

Another student disagreed with a Cree hunter in the documentary who said he had had to take his children out of school to teach them his way of life. The student explained: "Once your parents have taught you something from the bush you don't forget even when you're in school."

But we should also never forget that all of our perceptions, and the students' lives, are acted out on the stage of a society whose definition excludes the indigenous peoples. One teacher put it this way:

> It's not like a Jew in a class of Nazis, but it's certainly enough to keep your mouth shut, or to make you want to keep your mouth shut. That's another thing about the classroom. It's intimidating or can be, especially given what's going on outside. Apart from that, it's just the fact that people aren't speaking your language, they're not eating your food, you're not in your cultural space...And a lot of how successful you (the teacher) are depends on how sensitive you are to these facts of their environment. And then, when you've done all that, treat them equally. Or as equally unequal as you treat your other students.

Another teacher, grasping to explain this same phenomenon, also ventured that it may well result from the way the larger society treats native people.

> I think [their quietness] has got some historical roots to it. Whether, for example, non-natives' treatment of natives in terms of [making] fun of their belief systems, of their cultural values have anything to do with it I really do not know, but I think there must be some kind of a framework under which this thing operates because every term, every year, the pattern repeats itself.

A history of centuries of racism cannot be easily dismissed. We teach students who themselves have relatives who were taken away to residential schools where they were forbidden to speak their own language. Some students have described their grandparents telling them how the missionaries prohibited them from drumming. Perhaps with some of this in mind, the same teacher wondered: "Maybe there is a sort of inferiority complex or maybe they fear that if they do something, they may be in danger of being laughed at or being ridiculed."

Could it be, then, that native students in non-native classrooms tend to be quiet because for generations the non-natives have been trying to shut them up? Teachers of non-native students should be aware they teach people whose parents, older siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents have been forcibly taken away to residential schools. There, speaking their own language brought down punishment, often of a sadistic nature. Schools acted as important

primary institutions of forcible assimilation. When we hear stories finally emerging today about abuse in schools, we begin to realize how deeply some native people hold the feelings of fear and anger associated with teachers and schools. Every single Cree student I have taught has written to me about close relatives who have attended residential schools. These institutions are not distant history; people who attended them tell their own stories to the very students sitting in our classrooms, whom we then find to be very quiet, or "fading into the walls." No wonder!

But on occasion native students speak out freely in class, especially when they can be used as resources on their own communities and culture. When they do, we have to guard against a tendency to put this down to the fact that they're very acculturated, quite exceptional, or speak of them as "not really" Cree or Inuit. This teacher, for example, described one of her native students who participated well in class by saying: "I don't think he was really a [native] - he used to speak out a lot in class and looked quite white."

As non-natives, we know little of the perceptions and motivations of our native students and conceivably, if they could explain them to us, we might not understand, simply because their world view differs from ours. What do we know of their struggle to succeed in our institutions, according to our measures, without losing their essential sense of self? Through the ages hunting and nomadic societies prized values like co-operation, sharing, and quietness. (Imagine hunting with a incessant talker! I once canoed a river with someone like that, and we saw much less wildlife than usual.) The school system holds up qualities like competitiveness, aggressivity, individualism and pushing oneself forward. How do you succeed by such criteria without losing those qualities held dear by your group? The student who dares to speak in class or in a public forum should not be doubly penalized insofar as we then turn around and label that person "not really native."

In mainstream society we value "getting to the point" quickly, with the further admonition that "time is money." Such attitudes mitigate against people who consider it a denial of a person's independence to tell them what to do. How rude, from a native point of view, to consider others so dull-witted that they have to be told the point of your story, rather than sift out the meaning for themselves, or to show so little consideration for others that you do not spend sufficient time with them.

1.c Body Language

Early on in my interviews at John Abbott, I found several teachers used the same striking phrase when talking of native students: "I can't read them." As a teacher myself, I felt I knew what they meant, but asked several to explore this phrase more. One put it this way:

> I could not tell what was going on in their minds. And it's my cultural background, I suppose. Usually I can sit down with a student and from a twitch of the eyebrow, or a frown or anything else, I can tell if they're having problems or I've said something they don't understand or whatever. But this student especially I could not tell what was going on. Invariably, we would come out of these meetings and she would agree with me completely and wholeheartedly, "Yes I understand, definitely I understand." Then nothing.

The teacher clearly felt very frustrated by his inability to comprehend what his native students were thinking:

> The body language and facial expressions of the Cree and Inuit I just cannot read...it upsets me. It upsets me because I can't gauge whether or not I'm succeeding in what I want to do or if they've even understood. And I always took what they said at face value. And I'm still convinced to this day that that student did not understand but felt obliged to say that she did in order to make me feel better.

Another teacher exploring what she meant by saying, "You can't really tell from their faces," explained:

> It's just that they don't show emotion on their faces the way that I'm used to seeing on southerners. I'm used to seeing an expression of concern, or puzzlement if someone doesn't understand something, or concentration. Yet I don't see that. Maybe there are cues that I'm just not aware of. Maybe if you work with these people, you pick them up. A little signal that would tell you, but I'm not aware of these. I don't know if they're there or not. Maybe in their culture you don't show these things visually on your face or in your body language...Other students who are having problems, I can usually pick it up, by body language, or face, or because they aren't doing the tasks or completing them. I can usually pick it up. But not always with the Cree students.

When we consider the multicultural mix in our classes now, which many teachers noted, it strikes me that we will all have to come to terms with not receiving back from our students the kinds of signals we feel comfortable with and recognize easily. Teachers who pride themselves on their awareness of students and their ability to judge those students' reactions are often initially flummoxed by native students:

> Sometimes I'd wonder after a two-hour class if anything went in, because they wouldn't ask any questions or answer any questions. I'd say: "Well, is it understood how it's done?" There'd be nothing. I couldn't read their

> eyes. I couldn't see if they were clicking or not. And it wasn't until we...started doing stuff that I could see what level of comprehension there was. And I found that I would have to do a lot...more demonstrating than talking. They learn by doing, and that's why they were successful. We did, did, did all the time. Lots of practice.

The students themselves, a teacher recounted, are very aware of being labelled as "lacking initiative" or being "wooden-faced" and joked amongst themselves that, for a particular activity, they had to "show initiative" and "smile all the time."

If we couple this feeling many teachers have of not knowing if students have understood their lesson to the other theme on the quietness of native students, we can see that these teachers find a lack of recognizable signals indeed frustrating. While recognizing this frustration, a participant maintains there are ways of including such students.

> You can connect on a personal level without asking them a question. I think teachers have to realize that what we tend to do sometimes with people who are silent, and particularly with people who don't have a lot of expression in their faces, is we cue in to the others, and it's reinforcement...they're nodding and smiling, you know, indicating that they're listening. That's very reinforcing for us as teachers to talk to people who look like they're really into us, you know, but I try to keep my eyes going, not just on the aboriginal students, but on all the students, not just the ones who are doing all these wonderful cues, facial grimaces and whatever...so I feel you can include them all with your body language and style as much as singling them out and making them repeat things.

Maybe we teachers have to adjust our expectations, say some of the teachers. We may have to abandon our expectations that all students will give us recognizable signals of their understanding and enthusiasm. One indication of the interest of native students is their attendance, said this teacher. "If it's okay, they'll be there but just don't expect them to be verbose and animated looking."

Besides, why should we want them to change and act like us? asked this participant. If we feel left out, maybe it is our own problem.

> It's interesting that whatever the teacher is doing, if the students are still there, that's a good sign, even if by our cultural eyes we look for particular forms of behaviour...I think it's very helpful to know that we're not going to see those forms of behaviour in most of the Cree students. We're just not going to and we can't expect it. Why should they change? For our gratification? "I want to know how you're responding to my teaching - give me some feedback that I can see."

While we may find many native students "difficult to read," we must realize that this speaks as much to our own culture as to theirs - we search for our own signs. Many of our native students have been socialized in an entirely different way. Nor can we interpret the signs we may see using our own culture's framework without recognizing the tremendous potential for error.

In Dancing with a Ghost, Ross tells us how he began to understand the very different rules governing Ojibway behaviour (the Ojibway are an Indian nation living in what is now Ontario). Non-native rules and interpretations of behaviour contribute to the staggeringly high percentage of natives in prison. He presents an example relevant to our topic of being unable to "read" native students and the problems of interpreting other culture's rules of behaviour through our own.

> In the mainstream culture we are virtually bombarded with magazine articles, books and television talk shows telling us how to delve into our psyches, how to explore our deepest griefs and neuroses, how to talk about them, get them out in the open, share them and so on...The native exhortation...seems to go in the opposite direction. It is almost as if speaking about your worries puts an obligation on others to both share and respond, an obligation difficult to meet, given the prohibition against offering advice in return (1992: 33).

Psychiatrists doing assessments of native people in the courts generally misread their clients, he reports, often with disastrous consequences. They write reports saying things like "Retreats into denial and silence when pressed." Such reports are full of such words as "unresponsive," "undemonstrative," "uncommunicative" and the like (1992: 33).

As we shall see in Chapter V, several teachers found that while they may not be able to "read" their students' body language, they can read their thoughts well and stay in contact by using journals.

1.d Where Students Sit

In both colleges, more than half of the teachers interviewed referred to a tendency of native students to sit together. Apparently even family members - aunts and nieces, brothers and sisters - prefer sitting beside one another in contrast to typical seating patterns adopted by related non-native students. When they do so, they are a visible minority so teachers notice it more. Teachers' reactions run the gamut, some viewing this "clumping" as a problem:

> I think there's been a tendency to break them up as they tend to isolate themselves. I couldn't break them up, although I tried. They'd always go back together in their tight little knot and I couldn't break that.

At John Abbott, one teacher pointed to specific departmental policies to avoid these groupings. One person interjected that whereas three (native students) in a class is okay, twelve is a ghetto. Several disagreed, and believed that it helps the native students to be together. At Heritage, the tendency is to ensure that several of them will be in the same class, and a participant maintained:

> Sitting in a class of thirty and being the only aboriginal student, they say, is very intimidating particularly first term, but even right through. It's just that they're not comfortable not being with another aboriginal person.

Explaining this phenomenon of sitting together, another teacher remarked that this behaviour is likewise shown by all students.

> We know that groups of students sit together - kids who knew each other at school, the guys, the girls, the black students, the Pakistani students...all sit together or in the same place every time. None of that kind of stuff struck me as being any different from any other groups of students we have.

In her view, the students feel stronger by sitting together. It also reflects their isolation in the class. "They get strength from each other...If they don't sit with each other, they sit with black students. They act as expatriates do when we're in a foreign country. We hang around with each other. That's not unusual."

Some teachers disputed the view that native students sat together en masse. On further analysis they have noted that students sit in friendship cliques just like non-native students: individuals from the same community stay close to one another, as do individuals from the same ethnic group - Cree, Inuit or Algonkian. As time goes by, seating arrangements may, however, change depending on the friendships forged in class.

1.e Working in Groups

Many participants spoke to me about the relationships they saw between native and non-native students in their classes. Almost all the teachers who did so used group work as a teaching technique. Most of the teachers interviewed in this study teach mixed classes. Their reports of group work in these mixed classes varied as they recorded their observations of native and non-native interactions and behaviour.

On the one hand, teachers remark on the excellent relationship that develops between native students and the other students in certain sports. Non-native students actively searched out Inuit to join their volleyball teams since they excel in this sport.

> I've never seen anyone left on their own, sort of set aside. I think it's the nature of the activity for one, but because of who they are, and they're outgoing and quite accomplished at the game, so they have no problems.

The same physical education teacher has also noted how well the Inuit function in team sports, focussing on team spirit and co-operation:

> They do seem to be very supportive. That's the one thing that I've noticed. That as a team, when they do play together, they're very supportive. Whereas some of the other students in the class - mind you, it's a personality-thing anyway - get sort of cheesed off. So they're very supportive. If the ball goes off, or someone makes a mistake or whatever, everybody is smiling and happy. It's no big deal.

Like team sports, small groups formed in professional programmes, such as nursing, can lead to co-operation among the native and non-native students. Teachers working with nursing students have commented that the non-native students tend to be helpful and supportive towards their native peers.

On the other hand, in the general sector, where students do not have the closeness provided by small professional programmes, many more teachers pointed to difficulties of group work. They have noticed an awkwardness in the relations between aboriginal and non-aboriginal students at times. Non-native students are as puzzled as their teachers by the quietness that native students often exhibit, as this teacher noticed:

> Both of the [native students] have been working in groups with two other students who are just fabulous, very gentle, kind, polite girls but quiet themselves, not loud. They decided to work with the Cree students...but they certainly are finding it almost impossible to draw anything out of them.

At Heritage College, several teachers mentioned that when they ask the students to form groups, the groups very often form without including the native students. One indicated her concern that discussion groups only seem to work if they are composed of just native students. She wondered why non-native students do not show more sympathy when asked to form groups, and ask native students to join them, instead of leaving them out. "And actually, I don't know if it's fair to assign blame, because it's a kind of shyness on both sides because the wall is so high."

Certainly, most non-native students do not act in overtly racist ways towards the non-natives, but what the teacher sees may be enigmatic, as this participant

recounts. She asked the students to form groups of three or four, and did not assign them to particular groups:

> What happens is that nobody chooses the aboriginal students and they never do the choosing, they sit and wait and they often sit together, so after everyone has already started, they kind of turn to each other and say, okay, let's get going.

Another teacher who uses small group discussions forms the groups by counting off students, allocating numbers, and thus purposely ensuring a random mix of students. Counting students in this way, she believes, performs several functions.

First, it allows the students to get to know each other, after which they find the classroom a less threatening place. In one class, as she pointed out to a group consisting of a Cree, Inuk and Métis that they included representatives from all three aboriginal peoples, a student interjected, "And don't forget, I'm in Police Technology." Although incidents like that of Oka/Kanesatake stem from deep historical sources, surely one of the ways out of this impasse, she noted, comes from meetings like these in college classrooms.

Secondly, intercultural groups provide a forum for different native students to meet. Possibly this group experience may develop into an "old college-tie" native network which could be useful to these individuals who may well be leaders in the future.

Thirdly, and perhaps of most immediate importance, it ensures that students are not left sitting by themselves when groups are formed.

Not all aboriginal students, however, like group work. As one teacher pointed out, they might really enjoy group work in some classes but hate it in others "because they don't feel they're equipped to talk. They don't feel that what they say has value."

Their belief they have nothing of value to add to group discussions could partly stem from low self-esteem. Even small groups can be threatening, especially if, at the beginning of their college career, students do not know the rules by which they function. Perhaps, as one participant explained, because they do not know what to do, they simply watch - a very native way of learning - until they feel they understand what to do.

> For one thing, the experience is often new to them and I think - it's hard to generalize - but I think a lot of native students don't visibly or openly move into new situations. They observe. They're good observers. They learn from observation. They learn how to do it. Maybe at the end of two

> years they'll learn how to do it. Maybe two years wasn't enough. Maybe they'll be better speakers when they go back to their communities.

So far, we have been looking at native students through the eyes of the teacher standing in the classroom, or in some other way instructing a group of students. But teachers also see native students outside a group teaching situation. In the next section, I report what teachers told me they had noticed about native students outside class, and especially in their offices.

1.f Outside Class

Teachers raised two major points which I have classified as relating to the behaviour of native students outside class. The first, to which I have already referred, relates to the willingness of some native students to speak out in a college-wide activity at Heritage College. The second relates to the points many teachers raised about how their aboriginal students acted when visiting them in their offices.

At Heritage, in one Native Awareness Week, I was told, something like ten or fifteen students spoke to a very large gathering - of maybe three hundred students, teachers, administrators and support staff. They spoke about their communities, the issues that concerned them. Imagine, then, the effect on the community. Those issues which are not talked about in the classroom, the halls, the cafeteria become the focus of the college for a period in time. Interestingly, one participant recounted how at least one of these students had previously been unable to give presentations in their classes due to their shyness.

Quiet in the classroom they may be, but many teachers remarked on the fascinating and quite intimate discussions they have had with the students in their offices. Normally, when students come to our office we expect them soon to explain the reason for their visit, to which we will make the necessary response, then they will leave. Many teachers noted that native students generally do not follow this pattern. Instead, a visiting pattern akin to that of native communities emerges which teachers described something like this:

> She would come into the office and drop by from time to time, not the way I expect students to do when they have a question, although sometimes she would. But sometimes she would just come by, just come and sit a bit. She'd just come with her cup of coffee and sit opposite me at the desk and silence was okay. And after a few minutes, sometimes five or ten, she'd get up and say, "Well, I just came to say hello."

Several teachers, especially at John Abbott College, described various safe havens in the college which the students visit simply in a social way. What follows is a typical observation made by many teachers.

> I find them quite happy to talk about personal issues in the office, happier than most other students...We don't necessarily talk about problems...Other students don't open up that way. Take [X], for example, it takes her a long time to talk but then she won't stop talking about her father and her brothers.

A different teacher reported:

> This term too, though I'm not teaching him this term, he drops by my office and sits down and talks about nothing in particular. I always think that there's something very important because he comes and sits. I try to tease something out of him. But no, he's there to pass the time of day.

Teachers remarked a tendency of native students, when they do talk, to discuss quite personal matters. While protesting about our "nosiness," native students themselves can ask very personal questions at times! Perhaps these, for non-native teachers, rather intimate conversations also bring us a message about cultural differences. While non-natives tend to compartmentalize their lives, separating the sphere of work from the personal, native people tend not to make this separation which, anyway, would be almost impossible in most small northern communities where everybody knows everybody else. This does not solve the problem for one participant who enjoyed the visits from her students but felt frustrated at their lack of success in her course.

> A lot of these students see me very frequently. They would come but we'd very rarely talk about work. I just sort of gave that up after the first or second meeting. Because I just really felt that if I possibly came across as the heavy and said, if you want to pass this course, you get this work done and give it in to me...I just felt I couldn't say that. I sort of laid it out to them. They knew it. But it didn't seem to be what they were interested in doing. They used to come and talk to me about their families and about how their children are doing, what their husband was doing, about when they were last back up north. They seemed to be the things they really wanted to talk about. They didn't seem to be concerned that they weren't passing the course...I was quite willing to be very flexible. But that didn't seem to be the question they'd come to talk to me about.

One enigma for the non-native teacher of native students relates to the openness of many of their students in a one-on-one situation as compared with their quietness and "closed" look in a class situation. Time and again teachers told me that these students are very open and sharing when they get to know you. So much so, that:

> They often don't distinguish between family and close friends. They're all just incorporated in. So if you go over that line and are in fact considered to be somebody they trust, and want to interact with, they make demands on that person as if they were a family member...And that's hard as a teacher: you have to be able to tell the students, "No I can't do that."...And to say no is very confusing to them. "I thought you were somebody I could trust, I thought you were my friend." And that's very difficult and it becomes then a problem of acculturation on their part - they have to learn what we can do and provide for them, but meanwhile those of us who genuinely care die a thousand deaths either from overwork or...because you have to say no. But you have to do it to survive.

2. Obstacles to Academic Performance

Several participants spoke of their perceptions of the academic and cultural background of their native students and linked them to the academic difficulties they tended to have. What follows is not a systematic study of the academic achievements of aboriginal students in the two colleges; instead, it brings out those points highlighted by several teachers.

One issue emphasized by various teachers was a lack of preparation, on the part of the native students, in different disciplines. In math, for example, they often found themselves in remedial classes. From this point of view, the native students are in the same boat as the other students in those classes who similarly lack basic math skills.

Another issue relates to language skills. Teachers pointed to Inuit and Cree students especially as tending to be faced with a language problem. The students are required to read and write in a second language and a second culture. Some, said one teacher, can do beautiful narrative writing, but struggle for the kind of hierarchical thinking and writing that academic papers require.

> It was ironic to find that the Cree students were writing these wonderful journals with marvellous stories with great details. One student described leaving home, she described the looking down and seeing the tears on...I can't remember who it was. It was a very graphic, strong image and it was marvellous and just beautifully handled, eloquently written with perfect sentences. And then to see her struggling through a more academic paper was painful.

Languages like Cree and Inuktitut grew from an oral culture and reflect a way of conceptualizing quite different from that of the English (or French) language.

One participant gave a brief sketch of the tremendous difference between Cree and English.

> I try to speak to native students about that and had some very interesting talks. I know that when they try to translate sentences to me, there is a tremendous difference...and I don't think there's been enough work done on the intrusion of that syntactical base...I actually tried with a couple of Cree students: a simple declarative sentence. I tried to pick something easy and you cannot...the arrangement is different; the verb is different; there is no plural; there is no tense. The arrangement is completely different...And the notion of abstraction is very different.

The past few years have brought a more general recognition of the holistic way of thought of many native peoples. And whereas we emphasize the importance of analytic thought, this participant worried that the Cree (in this instance) lack this basic cultural preparation and tendency for "objectivity" which college requires.

> In our culture, we expect students in their learning process to develop objectivity. And everything we expect them to do is objective: you're studying - yes, we try to make things [fit] to who you are - but when it comes down to what your marks are going to be on that paper, you will have to have done a fairly objective piece of writing. You will have to make objective sense of material. And I'm just wondering whether that notion of objectivity, which is a very analytical, Western way of looking at ourselves, is not something which is part of a Cree culture.

Other teachers pointed to different language concerns. John Abbott College, unlike Heritage College, offers a considerable number of English-second-language courses which tend to alleviate these concerns.

Again, one should beware generalizations. On teacher noted that, however ill-prepared these students may be, some mainstream students are always worse, even if working in their own language and culture. The same teacher pointed out that one Inuk (Inuit) student received the second highest mark while another got the second lowest mark in his class. Several Inuit names figure on the Honours List at John Abbott College.

In the larger sense of the word, native students from the north are obviously less well prepared than other students by definition, because they are not part of mainstream culture. Yet when they attend cégeps, they enter institutions conceived of, run and peopled almost entirely by people of a different culture from their own. They come from different places in every sense of the word.

Although TV has penetrated their lives, the lives of northerners still differ from those of southerners. We southerners no longer listen actively for geese twice a year, or look forward to the caribou migration; few of us know everyone in our community and only the native people claim a special relationship to the land. Some of the students who adjust very well to college and whom teachers think of as fitting in really well have spent two years living in the bush with parents or grandparents. But the transition must be far more difficult for them than for a non-native living in Hull or the West Island.

Northern native students attend college, for the most part, in a second language and culture. Also, they often lack the academic preparation in many subjects which they should have. Many northern schools lack the resources to provide similar schooling to that in the south; for example, not all northern schools have the laboratory facilities necessary to teach sciences.

Granted, there have been amazing improvements in the schooling of native children since Arthur Lamothe in his wonderful film series on the Montagnais, or Innu of Québec's North Shore, showed how the school in Schefferville relegated all Innu children to "special education" classes. Following on the footsteps of many missionary schools before them, the teachers and administrators classed the Innu as academically incapable. By nature. The girls spent a lot of their "school" time cleaning their teachers' houses.

I was fascinated, and appalled, therefore, when one participant pointed out that this same kind of thing had been happening until very recently in Maniwaki.

> I don't think [the lack of preparation] is as bad as when they first got here. It turns out that the local high schools put them all in secretarial programmes. Now they have their own high schools. So they didn't have to take any math, any science. They didn't have to take anything much except maybe typing. They'd get their high-school diploma. That has changed.

Many participants pointed to non-academic factors resulting in students dropping out or failing to complete their courses.
Many teachers found that native students often have problems unrelated to language difficulties or insufficient background. All of them suffer from homesickness to a greater or lesser extent, and as John Abbott, at least, stands under a flight path for geese these urgings become more concrete at certain times of the year.

> We also have found that some just need to go home. They have to go home, back to the bush. They come again next semester. This time they're more prepared. And some of them have to do that two or three times before they can finish. Because it's just too much to do all in one session.

Unlike John Abbott College, end-of-term examinations are compulsory components of almost all courses in Heritage College, and some teachers remarked that these extend the time away from home even more and seem unfair to native students who, in their anxiety to go home, leave before taking the exams.

Native students tend to be older than regular day-time students which, added to the much higher birth rate, and their younger age at the birth of their first child, means that many have children. Apparently the women carry by far the larger burden for responsibility of child care, and many of them will be single mothers anyway. Because of the inadequacy of day-care arrangements generally, prime child-care givers often find themselves in a dilemma, having to choose between caring for a child or foregoing an activity, class, attendance in a hospital ward, etc.

Native women find themselves not only torn between their children present here and their school responsibilities, but also by their children in the communities. Often, they have left other children with relatives - maybe a daughter. And while most native people conceive of the family very differently from the majority of southerners, they still feel deeply the absence of their children.

The work-force does not cater to child care-givers, nor do most colleges. When you have young children and rely on public transport a class at 8.00 a.m. or 8.30 a.m. represents an enormous obstacle which even people with good (expensive) day-care facilities and cars for easy transportation find difficult.

> I know...8.30 a.m. classes are a problem, particularly if they have any of their children with them and they have to make sure they've gone off to school. They tend to come in late and I can understand that. That has nothing to do with their unwillingness to attend class or anything, but unfortunately it's sometimes perceived that way.

With the kinds of problems these students face, one has to expect them to be forced to drop out at times, then return. The very fact that they keep returning testifies to their strength, remarked this teacher.

> They've had to contend with problems going on at home which are not problems that any of us can relate to. The ones that have stayed...must have been very strong individuals because they had to cope with a lot more than people in the southern culture had to deal with, I think. I really do. And I can understand where some of them have come down and been able to be here one semester, two semesters, and then have to take a semester off just to get things sorted out in their life.

Teachers talked about students they know who have had problems with alcohol or drugs, or of some other harrowing kind. Of course, they pointed out, our non-native students have these problems too.

Many of the students, when they do talk to teachers, tell them tales which quite shock them:

> One young woman came to see me and opened up to me...she told me her life story of sexual abuse by her parents and about being protected by an older boy. She married him, got into drugs and alcohol and ended up in court. She went on and on and I was flabbergasted. I thought to myself, how old is she? early twenties? And she's had all these experiences that I haven't had.

As usual, though, I should add a cautionary note before closing this section to the effect that the academic success of native students depends on many factors, and we see a great disparity among them. Their proficiency in English, the length of time they have lived among non-natives, the services and programmes available to them all play a role. The time and energy they have to put into those parts of their lives unrelated to school count too.

CHAPTER III. PROCESSING INFORMATION

1. Cultural Differences: Incidents and Interpretations

In the preceding section, I tried to place the reader in the position of teachers either while teaching or doing teaching-related activities, looking out on their aboriginal students and taking notice of certain behaviours. Most teachers noticed native students tended to be quieter than non-natives; many spoke of different patterns of eye contact, and that native students generally sat together. In John Abbott, several teachers remarked that they could not "read" their aboriginal students as they felt they could the non-natives. Many teachers pointed to patterns of relations between native and non-native students that had caught their notice. Many also spoke of their relationship with native students outside the class. Finally, several spoke about their perception of the level of preparation of these students and some of the hurdles they have to overcome.

In this section I aim to give the reader some understanding of how teachers process those differences they have remarked. Our eyes see, then our brain processes those images. How do we shape those dots, lines and blurs? We filter our own images. But if we do not have appropriate filters, we may distort the information.

Under this rubric are specific incidents remarked on by teachers showing the kinds of misunderstandings which can occur when we attempt to communicate with others from a different culture.

In Dancing With A Ghost, Ross retells a story told by Dr. Clare Brant, a Mohawk from Tyendinaga in southern Ontario. The story goes like this.

The Mohawk, a farming people well before Europeans arrived, invited a group of James Bay Cree to a sporting tournament in the 1970's. Mohawks typically provided more food than their guests could consume, which demonstrated their wealth and generosity. The Cree, a nomadic hunting people by tradition, had developed a quite contrary custom. They always ate all the food laid before them, so showing their respect for the hunters and their generosity.

When these two groups met and each operated by their traditional rules, imagine the potential conflict! The Cree, anxious to show respect to the Mohawks ate and ate, finally marking the Mohawk down as some kind of gastro-intestinal sadists. The Mohawk, for their part, saw the Cree as ill-mannered and insulting.

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Ross chose the story to illustrate the misunderstandings that can occur when two cultures meet and the way they attribute negative motives to one another. As he explains:

> The significant point is that each group believed that the other was intentionally being insulting and disrespectful when, in fact, each group had been going to great pains (especially the Cree!) to show exactly the opposite. The problem lay in the fact that each group could only see the other through its own rules, could only interpret the behaviour of others from within their own perspective (1992: 3).

Similarly, several teachers expressed their frustration with the way native students respond, or as they see it, do not respond to them. This frustration often emanates from a lack of knowledge about aboriginal cultures. It is not surprising that teachers know so little of the First Nations who have only recently begun to enter Canadian consciousness. According to Ross, despite the fact that we all live in a country called Canada, "Our two cultures are in my view separated by an immense gulf, one which the Euro-Canadian culture has never recognized, much less tried to explore and accommodate" (1992: xxii).

His own surprise at discovering the immensity of the gulf shocked him, a shock which he explains in retrospect as based on a particular assumption:

> That Indians were probably just "primitive versions" of us, a people who needed only to "catch up" to escape the poverty and despair which afflicts far too many of their communities.
>
> That assumption is both false and dangerous. We would never carry it into China or Tibet or any other obviously foreign place...They are not just different versions of us. They began their journey to today not where we did, with the Mediterranean world-view classically enunciated by Plato and Aristotle...The paths they followed were completely different from ours as we passed through the rise and fall of Greece and Rome, the Christian Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the development of wage and money economy, secularization, and the growth of major cities. For most Indians of the North, even the Industrial Revolution took place without their knowledge or direct involvement (1992: xxii-xxiii).

That we do sometimes communicate successfully is surprising, but sometimes we do not, and one teacher recounts a story paralleling in many ways the story of the Mohawk and Cree with which we began. In this case the student had responsibilities in a work setting:

> The girl didn't show up at all. They are required to phone in, and she didn't do that. I spoke to her after the first time that happened. The next time she wanted to take a day off she did the same thing without ever notifying anybody again. The third time it happened again. And when I spoke to her, to point it out, trying my best to get it across to her that she had this responsibility, and that she could phone me, she looked at me and smiled. And, you know, I had an impulse then just to take her and shake her. And even when I said: "This is failing behaviour. This is not acceptable. You can't do this and get through the programme," she still continued to smile, and I found that very hard to deal with...When you're telling somebody off and literally I was about shouting, saying, "What are we going to do? This is failing. How are we going to sort this out?" And all I got was a smile. And I found that very hard to deal with actually.

This story epitomizes the kind of cultural miscommunications teachers can experience. Teachers have to care about deadlines, responsibility, and showing up. Some teaching situations demand this kind of behaviour from the student. So when the student apparently flaunts the rules even after the consequences have been explained, the teacher, not wanting the student to fail, becomes angry.

Readers should be reminded here that many, if not all, native cultures discourage such displays of anger. In hunting societies, one might explain this by the need for group solidarity and cohesion. If someone transgresses this rule, politeness requires the display of anger be ignored. Here, the student did so, her laughter most probably expressing her embarrassment at such a difficult situation. The teacher then translated the laughter into her own cultural rules, with the Euro-Canadian interpretation that it symbolizes mocking someone, or making light of something. This in turn makes her even angrier.

In his work Ross noted several such incidents of miscommunication brought about by individuals not understanding the other's signals.

> I suspect that it is commonplace for signals to be misread when Native and non-Native people meet, commonplace for each of us to hear things which the other never intended, and to go away with entirely mistaken impressions...We assume...that the way we behave, express ourselves, and interpret others is the way all people do it (1992: 5).

Another teacher's story shows how these cultural miscommunications can escalate if we are not careful. In a clinical situation, a nurse had told a teacher that her native student's silence was making the patients uncomfortable. The teacher had explained the duties to the nursing students regarding their patients. Despite her instructions, she observed this incident.

> I went into one room about 10.30 in the morning where one of the students was supposed to be talking to the patient. And she was just sitting in an armchair in the room. And to me it looked like she was just there, doing nothing. [In my traditional training you interpret sitting down as you're being lazy.] So I looked at that student and thought: what does this behaviour mean? But I really didn't know what it meant. I felt very frustrated. I didn't know what to do...I didn't see any change in the behaviour over the entire semester.

Later on, the same teacher brings an entirely different interpretation to the student's behaviour, one that comes from an understanding of how a different culture operates:

> We then realized that that was very active learning, the way she had learned when she grew up in the bush with her parents. Because that's the way she had learned when she grew up in the bush till she was taken away to residential school: she learnt by watching, active watching. To our eyes, it looked like somebody who was sitting there and couldn't be bothered to do any work. And you know, she had no idea of the effect it was having on the other people about her, or that people would be interpreting her behaviour as anything other than active learning. She was feeling comfortable sitting in that chair...watching.

Through the teachers' eyes and ears, which is the perspective of this study, we glean scraps of information about how it must be to students who have to operate in a completely different culture. In the story above, a student learns that accepted, polite behaviour in a native community makes non-natives uneasy. The same teacher now explains that native students, constantly faced with strange and, in their eyes, inexplicable behaviours, "can't understand what they've done wrong. Because that would be perfectly reasonable in their own culture. You could stand there for a period of time, or sit there, and that's a way of communicating. They are asking themselves, what did I do wrong? And I think that's what culture shock is. When all the behaviours we're used to using don't seem to work. Nothing you're used to doing works any more."

We should not forget we have two groups, each rather perplexed about the other at times. Teachers wonder why students behave in such unaccustomed ways; students wonder how to explain such strange behaviour on the part of the teachers. And sometimes the way a participant from each group reacts exacerbates the gulf between the two.

A story about multiple-choice exams well illustrates the above point. The teacher looked back with some amusement as she remembered the story:

> All our exams are multiple-choice. We decided we would go over the exam with the students question by question...We wanted to see where the difficulties were. And there was a question on anxiety which said: "Which of the following behaviours would indicate that a person is moderately anxious?" This came straight out of the textbook. The answers range from increased verbalization, which is correct, to decreased verbalization, which is an incorrect answer. And all of [the Cree] picked decreased verbalization, [the incorrect answer according to the textbook, but the correct answer for them]. And all of a sudden [my colleague] and I looked at each other and said, "Oh my gosh," and we laughed. We all laughed. Because I said, "Oh yes, that's right. Whenever you're stressed, we don't hear any of you say anything." They stop talking under stress.

Teachers work with words. They expect verbal responses to their questions and comments, and - following Euro-Canadian culture - many feel the need to "fill up" silences. So teachers who follow the kind of pattern described in the textbook above, anxious when native students do not respond, speak more and more, faster and faster. The native students, becoming more and more uneasy themselves, respond by silence, leading to the teacher speaking more. And so on.

To perform successfully by Euro-Canadian criteria often requires native students to transgress their own standards of appropriate and polite behaviour. A nursing teacher gives an example of this. She explained that because Cree nursing students do not share the same culture as their patients, they cannot always interpret cues correctly. They may very well take something a patient has said personally, when it is, in fact, something quite different that is bothering the patient. Here is the result:

> They tend to withdraw. They'll step back rather than try to assess or deal with whatever the patient is going through. In other words, they personalize it more than other students would. They tend to do this because in their culture you don't question when someone shows you they don't wish to speak to you. You don't question it. You accept that it's their space and their time and what they want. But certainly in the field of nursing, while that's something that is behaviour that a patient may demonstrate to you, nevertheless because you are giving care, you have to find out what the underlying problem is, what the cause is. And the Cree students aren't ready to do that, that's not in their culture, to pursue. They are less likely to disturb a patient. The patient may be sleeping, but they also need to be disturbed, unfortunately, to get up and out of bed.
> Question: So if you have a patient that says leave me alone?

Answer: Right, and of course, they will. They'll turn right around and walk out of the room.

Non-native nursing students might find it threatening when patients say things like "leave me alone," and immediately signify this to their supervisor. Native students are less likely to do so since Cree culture acknowledges the individual's right to do as they feel far more than the Euro-Canadian norm. And yet, the supervisor should have known if any assigned task was not completed. This dramatically highlights yet another situation where cultural norms can clash.

The recognition of cultural difference leads to the question of re-examining our evaluation tools to take these differences into account. One participant reminisced:

> One of the areas we evaluate is communication, caring behaviour, eye contact and all this kind of thing. So in that section I wrote: "Unable to evaluate this because this is a student whose communication behaviour is very different from what we expect, and this is obviously due to cultural difference." And of course, I wouldn't fail that student. I wouldn't.
> Question: But you emphasize you.
> Answer: Right. But I think that teachers who aren't making a conscious effort to try and understand behaviour might think, "Well, I can't pass this student. She's got to meet these objectives just like all the other students." What I did is try to look at other things. For example, I noticed these students really cared for elderly people. And so there was a very caring attitude. Most of these students - I don't like to generalize or stereotype - are not afraid to take things more slowly, and they didn't rush through things...and they're terrific for elderly people. I mean they were perfect...But I made it very clear that there were a number of things that these students did not do, and one was asking direct questions, which [one] has to do.

These kinds of questions emerge whenever we assess aboriginal students for "communication skills" - whether directly, in classes requiring them to demonstrate these (as we define them), or in classes where teachers assess how well students have "participated," for example, based on Euro-Canadian criteria.

No wonder teachers ask themselves "What are we doing?" For schools and colleges indeed inculcate values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. They socialize through a complex set of rewards and punishments so the end product fits well into society. In our case, the society we fit people into is obviously the Euro-Canadian dominant society. So if, for native students to succeed in our colleges, they must change their whole way of communicating, thinking, believing and

being, then are we telling them that the only way they can succeed in college is to become like us?

Simply speaking, writing and reading our language does not suffice. At the very least, they must know and understand how things work in our culture. Until the boards setting Canadian-wide exams respond to those who point to their inherent ethnocentricity, students sitting those exams must learn the "right" answer even when it is wrong for them. This does not just apply to native students, obviously. As one teacher pointed out:

> The Cree are different, but so are all our students. None of them share my culture. Even if they come from the same country, they are of a different generation with different experiences. We may have shared a culture with the students in 1969, but it's just not the same today...for this reason, examples must come from the students for them to make sense to them. We teachers may think we have come up with a really splendid example of something, only to find that it has no relevance to the students. It must spring from them.

One teacher related her surprise when Inuit students kept referring to Montreal as the south. She and the rest of the class had difficulty processing this concept. For them, "the south" refers to Florida. Other participants recounted how native students have spoken to them of their confusion when faced with statements by teachers who have taken as a given that all their students share their culture. Teachers speak of "our culture" as having particular attributes, but these are not attributes of native cultures necessarily. Native students take down notes, saying things like: "Aristotle and Plato's thinking form the basis of our culture," or "From now on we became individualists." Teachers assign papers, or write tests and exams, including phrases like: "Compare our concept of class with that of class in India."

These kinds of statements confuse native students for a variety of reasons. First, the native student who repeats phrases such as "our way of thinking is based on Greek philosophers," or "we are all individualists" repeats something patently untrue for her or him.

Secondly, they often do not know how they should respond to questions which assume a homogeneous "we". The following stories give some indication that they do not share all mainstream's cultural cues.

One participant related how a native student told her she had sat through an entire class where a Romantic poem in which the rose figured prominently as a symbol had been discussed. After the class, the student, chatting with the participant (not the teacher of this class) asked: "What is a rose?" Not knowing what a rose is, remarked the participant, "made it kind of hard to talk about the

symbolism of a rose when you don't even know what a rose is. And it's not a symbol of love and all that stuff in your own culture."

To further complicate matters, even concepts like "romance" cannot be taken to be universal.

> I was talking to [an Inuk student] about cross-country skiing. She said she'd like to ski with [her boyfriend], and I said there's a beautiful place, Cap St-Jacques, where you can go skiing along the lake and then there's this big old stone house, where there's a fireplace and you can get a hot chocolate. And I said, it's so romantic. And this other [Inuit] girl...said, "What's so romantic about that?" The first one explained: "To us a fire means camping. It's not romantic." Then the second girl added: "What does romantic mean anyway? So I said, "What would you call romantic at home?" They said: "We're not even sure we have that concept."

How then, are aboriginal students to respond when we make erroneous assumptions or, for them, untrue statements? We Euro-Canadians might think to challenge the teacher - our bravest students might; but most native students would shy from such a response, considered impolite . If they have to write a paper, or question, on the topic, should they write as if "our culture" means their culture, or does it mean "Euro-Canadian?" This, of course, means they are really writing the answer to a different question than what the teacher may have intended. As well, it eliminates the worth and existence of native culture.

Many aboriginal students experience school as an imposition of a different culture. Apparently, they also do not expect us to know much about them, as this teacher found out. Probably this expectation derives from past experience:

> I walked into the class and I saw these strange-looking young men, slightly different. And I knew they weren't Asians, so I asked them. And they said, "We're Eskimos." And I said, "You're Eskimos?" And they laughed and said, "We used that word because we didn't think you'd know what Inuit meant."

Could it be that the kinds of issues I have illustrated above give rise in many aboriginal students to a sense of real alienation from college? One participant coined a particularly haunting expression to describe the sense of a lack of involvement he felt was more general among native than non-native students. Native students, he said, are like spectators.

> It's as if they're spectators here. They're not really aware of the system or the rules operating in it so they just kind of come her to see how it

> operates - like a fly on the wall. And if they like it, fine, and if they don't, they'll just go back to the reserve or something...It's as if friends or family of theirs that have come here or gone back in the summer or holidays, have said, "Why don't you come down and try it?" So they go, "Okay, fine." So they just come here. In trying to ask them why they're here, they don't really have a clear sense of why. "You're in this programme, why? What do you want to do with it?" "I'm not sure, maybe I'll go back to the reserve later." So they're really just drifting.

Yet another cultural difference has to do with the concept of time. Just about every non-native who has contact with native people remarks on their different conception of time. Almost every teacher in Heritage mentioned time in connection with native students one way or another.

One teacher isolated two major differences between native and non-native students. One, he explained, stems from a conception of themselves rooted in the group, the collectivity, rather than the individual. The other revolves around the concept of time.

> They have a different conception of time. Completely different. Here we have a very linear conception. Things have to be done. It's very precise, strict boundaries, strict schedules. We compartmentalize things. Deadlines, deadlines. This is what I really find with native students: they don't have a sense of deadlines. They don't understand why things are done in a particular order or linear fashion. Their sense of time is more fluid, more relaxed. "We'll get around to doing it," they say.

This different attitude lies at the root of many cultural misunderstandings between teachers and students. Teachers may see students as "lazy" and "not bothering" to do work on time. But another remarked: "So many of their problems are about time. Learning how to budget time, manage time and get things in. So if you're a teacher who's really rigid, it destroys these students."

Most of the teachers interviewed mentioned that they had adjusted in some ways to take this different notion of time into account. They had really posed themselves the question of whether it mattered if something was done this week or next, and often decided that accommodations could be made.

For some participants, the realization that aboriginal students would actually do things in their own time opened up a new way of seeing them. In a non-classroom situation, one teacher found that, if he allowed himself to relax his Euro-Canadian notions of things having to be done at a specific time by the clock, things would indeed get done. Not only would everything he wanted get done, but students whom before he had thought "lacking in initiative" took the initiative. For those whose teaching situations allow it, following the students'

sense of "when the time is right" rather than going strictly by a clock-time can provide a different view of native students.

2. Filtering the Perceptions

"The more you know about a group of people, the less 'other' they are, the less different," commented one teacher.

And, many teachers interviewed added, familiarity with other cultures enables them to process the information they receive from non-mainstream students in a less distorted fashion.

However, there are dangers to learning about The Other. Teachers are human beings too, and they themselves recognize they also have the very natural tendency to generalize, and make assumptions about The Other. While teachers appreciate being alerted to the differences of native students, they acknowledge that it may play into certain stereotypes.

> It's good to get advice...and then to orient yourself and to go and understand people on their own terms, individually. Because if you don't do that, you'll see people through the stereotype...you'll miss the individuals.

So yet another knife edge appears: on the one hand, most teachers feel the need to know more about how to teach native students more effectively, but on the other hand, they acknowledge how difficult it is to do this without creating, maintaining or adding to certain stereotypes. Speaking of his own stereotype of native students, a teacher noted: "And those prejudices I feel deeply inside me from the things I've been told and the assumptions I've made, and that's what I'm having trouble with."

In both colleges, a surprising number of teachers interviewed spoke to me about their experience living and/or working with other cultures. In John Abbott, especially, many teachers pointed to the changing face of the classroom. Over two-thirds of the teachers interviewed at John Abbott have a direct multicultural connection. By this I mean, that either they themselves or their spouse is an immigrant and/or not part of the two main ethnic groups in Québec, or they may have lived and/or worked in other countries, or in native communities.

As no statistics exist on the ethnic composition of the teachers in the two colleges, I cannot venture to guess if this proportion is representative of each of the faculties. I enter it here because it began to strike me after several participants spontaneously spoke to me of their background and experience, referring to it as

helpful to them in teaching native students. We do know, however, that the anglophone cégep teachers tend to be much more multi-ethnic than those in the francophone cégeps.

Along with their personal experience with multiculturalism, all teachers in both colleges now experience teaching in multicultural classes. Time and again, teachers remarked on the multi-ethnic composition of their classes, often adding how positive they found the experience. One commented:

> There are so many different backgrounds of students in classes now...You know, you look at your class list from ten years ago and it's not the same now. Which I think is very healthy.

Yet another added:

> The thing I'm finding - this isn't just for native students - our population is changing so radically from the white West Islanders to a real hodgepodge that there is no common reference point, because you get students from Pakistan or India, and you're talking Christian mythology to them that might be totally alien.

The same teacher pointed to his truly multi-ethnic class:

> I have four Inuit students, then students from East India, first generation Greeks, Italians, a growing number of black students - all sorts of visible minorities, and they all have different backgrounds.

Unlike fifteen or twenty years ago, a typical nursing class now comprises not only "seven blacks, two Filipinos, one Chinese" but also male students and several older women.

The classroom, then, emerges as increasingly multiethnic. And this leads to an interesting topic which teachers raised. For those who agree native students have special needs and want to make some of the adjustments they see as necessary, a problem of identification arises. Whereas some native students may be more easily identifiable as Cree, Algonkian or Inuit and so on, not all of them are. Some have unusual names; others have names as common as the Smiths and Browns or Tremblays of the dominant cultures. One John Abbott teacher talks about this:

> Of course, the classroom is not very homogeneous. We have kids of Korean origin, Arabic origin, Greek, Indian, Italian so it's difficult to speak of "white" kids. But a couple of them, just from physical characteristics, it would be difficult to identify them as Cree. They look like any other kid

> in the class...So until a couple of them made it clear...I wasn't aware of the fact that they were native students at all.

To conclude, I offer the following story which I believe illustrates the kinds of enigmas constantly arising out of the meeting of different cultures. I, for one, do not know what to make of it.

> One of them came to see me in my office, telling me that she'd started her period so couldn't come to class.
> Question: Do you think she felt very ill?
> Answer: I don't think so. I think it was a cultural thing - when you have your period you go home. I asked if she was feeling all right, she said yes. That was the one reason she gave: she'd started her period so she had to go home.

Reading this story, several questions come to mind. The teacher interprets this as "a cultural thing," which is possible, but why, then, have we not come across this kind of thing more often? This appears to be an isolated incident. It may be that the student wanted to go home for all the same reasons that a non-native in the same circumstances might want to go home. It may be that the student simply did not want to go to class and, searching for a good excuse, came up with this. Would the student have presented this excuse to a male teacher? This was a woman teacher. Because the student is aboriginal, the teacher is more likely to ascribe "cultural" reasons to her behaviour. But if we do not attempt to explain apparently odd behaviour, to us, as attributable to cultural differences, would we not be unfair?

CHAPTER IV. POSING QUESTIONS

In the previous chapters, we have looked out through the teachers' eyes and seen what they have seen. They remarked on the different behaviour of aboriginal students. We saw how they recounted different incidents of cultural miscommunication; how many became acutely aware that native students did not operate with the same assumptions and modalities as those of most of their students. In this section, we will explore with the teachers what they make of all this. Or rather how, as they become aware of the students' attitudes and behaviours, and realize a cultural gap exists, they wonder about their role as teachers, and what their objectives should be.

Only recently have aboriginal students been attending colleges across Canada in any real numbers, and even today, they represent a very small percentage of the college population. Heritage College and the Cégep de Sept-Iles stand out in Québec, because of the relatively high proportion of aboriginal students at each, namely 9% at Heritage in 1992 and almost 7% in Sept-Iles in 1989. A teacher alluded to these new arrivals, and the concomitant search for direction many teachers struggle with today: "College education is new for aboriginal students, so it's not surprising that we don't know what to do, and that there are no models."

In the interviews, I witnessed many teachers struggle over what role they should be playing with native students. Some expressed misgivings about imposing an alien culture upon aboriginal students. Others, while sharing these concerns, did not hesitate to speak of their responsibility to empower native students. In Heritage especially, the participants communicated a sense of the urgency of the task before them as they watch the enrollment of native students increase every year by leaps and bounds. Though the sheer numbers of students make their task in some ways more urgent than that of the teachers at John Abbott overall, they also benefit from having enough students now to speak out themselves about their needs.

1. What Should Be the Role of the Teacher?

1.a Walking a Fine Line

As native students appeared in their classes, several teachers started to wonder what part they should play in this new phenomenon. As they became more aware of the cultural distance, and of the place of aboriginal peoples in Canadian society, they experienced a certain discomfiture at the position in which they found themselves. Several teachers communicated to me in eloquent terms how they felt they continuously walked a fine line as regards their aboriginal

students. What should be their objectives? Should they try to have the students adjust to the mainstream, or should they do something different? If so, what? The angst of this teacher as she described her ambivalence is almost palpable.

> I have a real sense of ambivalence about what we're doing anyway. I think that there is a sense I have that in order to teach the kinds of things we do, we're asking them to betray the kinds of things they do. And there isn't really a clear resolution to that. So you kind of try to fly by the seat of your pants because you hope you're not doing too much damage. But it's difficult to allow, to encourage them to authenticate themselves and their own experience and at the same time to ask them to work within an entirely alien experience.

But "the act of struggling to come to terms with these issues defines ourselves and our humanity," observed one participant. As teachers, we might put aside these issues and say they don't concern us but, he went on to say, such struggles are the essence of life:

> If you want to see students just as issues or things, none of these problems arises. You go into class, they take notes, those who pass, pass and those who don't, don't pass. What else could they need? But if you try to see it in a much larger scope, a lot of other issues and questions and problems arise - these are not trivial things. They are the real things.

Are there any neutral corners? Is the classroom one? Probably not, since the classroom belongs to a group which has acted as dominator for hundreds of years. Now, our success in the classroom:

> All depends on...how they are perceiving us. Are they perceiving us as an adversary? As belonging to someone who is out there to teach them something with a stick? That kind of colonial relationship which they have experienced from non-native people? Or is it more a different kind of attitude? A kind of a parity? A kind of relationship which is based on parity: "We are all equal, it's just that I happen to know something that you don't know. Let me give it to you and if you like it, keep it. If you don't, just forget about it." As teachers we have to be cautious about this. It's that kind of attitude which exists out there towards us. Do they see us as adversaries or as a partner?

Adversaries or partners, enablors or oppressors? While not all teachers interviewed described their experience in such terms, many admitted to feelings of insecurity about teaching native students.

> Day to day I feel quite inadequate a lot of the time. You're wrestling with it all the time and looking for other windows like that [a successful "hook"

> for material being covered]. Often, I think, not finding them...I think, "Oh God, why did I ever choose this?" because there's nothing in here that I can make these kids relate to.

The inappropriateness of course content poses problems for several teachers. Teaching a particular course content, premised on the assumption that this society takes its philosophical and historical roots from ancient Greece and Rome, brings home to more than one participant that the question of the teacher's role has not yet been satisfactorily answered.

> Then you feel that no matter how hard you try to teach this topic, you feel...somehow guilty about teaching a topic by which some people in the class may feel left out...I feel that I'm least successful in communicating things which I perceive not to be anthropologically, culturally part of their heritage. Sure you could tell me, that's why they are here. They want to learn about these things. But teaching a course in Descartes or Aristotle presupposes one thing - we are all part of the same heritage, or that we do things in the same way.

And although we all live in the same country, the distances in flight time from Montreal to Wemindji, Whapmagustui or Ivujivik belie the distances in culture. Are these students supposed to cast off all their culture when they arrive here, asked this participant. Can teachers find a way to allow these students to authenticate themselves within our alien institutions?

> But it struck me at the time how maybe, that yes, they might still be living in Quebec, and only a flight away from us here in Montreal, but we have very little understanding of how those students can adapt to what we are asking. It just seems to be ...almost unjust to be using our criteria for them, and maybe there's a way to sort of bridge that. But my experience so far with the Cree students is that I haven't been very successful in doing that. So I'll be very interested to know: how can we still accept their culture, the richness, which I clearly felt when I spoke to these students on my own, and am fascinated by? Now do they just have to throw that aside when they come to John Abbott or is there some way we can bridge that gap with the student without the student feeling that we're being condescending doing that?

Not surprisingly, given that the native peoples of Canada have been systematically excluded from society, Canadians generally know very little about aboriginal cultures, and that lack of knowledge makes several teachers nervous about what they are doing. This teacher spoke about her lack of information and her unwillingness to act strictly as an agent of assimilation.

> There are some missing links, which are being half understood. But I don't really know what it is. I suppose it's always the conundrum we're in when we're working with students from a very different environment, where I start feeling that we're being rather presumptuous pushing our system on them. So I'm always slightly nervous...of saying: "This is the way to do it; if you can't do it like that, push off." I'm always nervous of coming across as: "Do this and if you can't do it, tough luck."

This teacher was not alone in her reluctance to play a role in what she perceived as an assimilationist way of doing things. For many teachers, the crux of the question appeared to be: "Am I justified in demanding the same performance from these students, knowing how different their cultures are from mine, and recognizing too, that aboriginal people are not a minority like any other?" Another teacher worried that: "I just don't know if we can say they're here in my class and they have to perform just like the other students perform."

Not all teachers, though, viewed the issues this way, as we shall see in the next chapter. Others apparently do not agree that the aboriginal people of Canada have any kind of special status. One participant described them this way: "The native kids are just the largest of the minorities, that's all."

Another teacher pointed to the fact that when universities accept a large number of foreign students, they know they have to provide many related services, and yet colleges do not seem to feel the same obligation to native students. He remarked that he and other teachers have received papers and journals from their native students which voiced some of their own concerns at attending non-native institutions. Many of these students live through difficult emotions, as the following reveals.

> One student wrote an essay and there was a very disturbing line there. She was talking about her experience in the college and attending a white school and asking for her grandfather's forgiveness for coming to an English school. This wasn't meant to be part of the essay. It was a line somewhere buried in the whole paper, but it caught my attention that there is a struggle going on in the mind of this student, doing something sinful that she maybe wasn't supposed to do. Or if the grandfather is dead, would he forgive her for going to a white school? It is a beautiful line to read, but it is something to be concerned about.

No wonder some of the teachers, who personal material like this ask themselves what they are doing. And by so doing, the teachers demonstrate not a lack of purpose but rather their humanity.

1.b Empowering Students

Possibly Heritage teachers on the whole brought to their interviews somewhat less of a sense of hesitancy than the John Abbott teachers, less questioning of what they should be doing teaching native students and more of a sense of the urgency of the task they saw before them. For some that task was very clear: one of empowerment.

> I have done a bit of reading on feminist methodology in the classroom and I think part of that is applicable as well to the native students in that it's empowering. The idea behind education is to empower the student, not to impose. And I think that's what I really try to aim at in the classroom.

Commenting on her perception of whether or not aboriginal students "faded into the walls," one teacher noted that this changes when several factors are present. She believed that teachers have to see education as something which empowers and if they do, they will notice differences. As well, she pointed out that the students feel more powerful as their numbers increase.

> But if you see education as empowering people, that ["fading into the walls"] begins to change. And I think what's happening round here is just the numbers themselves have given the students a certain amount of power...And when the teachers now look around and begin to acknowledge that, "My goodness they do have mouths, they really can speak," the teachers have begun to enter into the process. The students are actually feeling the power and now they want to sit on committees, they want to speak out.

Another difference between Heritage and John Abbott teachers turned up in the interviews. Far more than their colleagues at John Abbott, Heritage teachers spoke of what native students wanted, or how the students saw a particular issue. Teachers felt fairly confident making such pronouncements, I think, because at Heritage the native students themselves have told the college on several occasions what they want and how they see things. Regular monthly lunch-time gatherings give native students a chance to discuss matters relevant to them amongst themselves. As well, they have on occasion participated in "teach-ins" for the whole college, informing others about their communities and their concerns. In a survey conducted in 1991, they voiced their opinion on matters of importance to them. It is not surprising, then, that teachers at Heritage spoke far more confidently of the native students' attitudes to college and teaching than the John Abbott teachers.

One issue of concern to the students is the importance of gaining an education. According to a teacher at Heritage College, native students have expressed the view that education is very important. "They want to have one foot in here because that's what education is, and they want to have one foot in their communities."

Similarly, a John Abbott teacher recounted how her Cree students have told her what they need to learn. She noted, as have several others, that aboriginal students invariably speak of "going back to help their communities." A disenfranchised people, she saw them as coming to college to acquire skills to deal with non-natives. In contrast to other teachers interviewed, she considered they have a remarkable sense of purpose regarding their schooling.

> What I began to realize is that they had a sense of having been disenfranchised and that their ability to rectify that was very contingent on their ability to speak on our terms, to use our styles of discourse and to adapt some of our methods of negotiations. And I think that it has given them a missionary purpose that lies behind a lot of their efforts here. Certainly the students I talked to all said they want to go back and help their people. Now that doesn't mean to agitate politically, but it does mean they are imbued with a sense of purpose which is different from most of our regular students...I think all of them have a sense that they are here for a reason and that the reason is to assist their own people as far as they can. So it struck me that their education is very focused because it's purposeful.

A Heritage teacher told a similar story. Although there is a general feeling that many aboriginal students have no sense of purpose, some clearly do, she explained. In one class discussion a student told of a vision that changed his life. He said: "I am a Cree; I want an education but I am a Cree." The student told the class about a vision he had had, commenting that before this: "I didn't know who I was, I was hunting for it". The teacher continued:

> He didn't call it a vision, but the way he described it, it was a vision, and his vision changed his life, and now he knows who he is: he's a Cree. You know what he's doing next summer? He's going back and he's arranging for all the elders in the community to set up an exhibit of how to do all kinds of traditional things that elders know how to do. He's organizing this. Again, this is a person who never spoke for the first six weeks...And someone said, "[He] is lucky, he's full-blooded Cree, he knows who he is, but my grandparents and my children are white. I have to teach my children both ways; the white side and the native side." Another one who spoke was actually born on an American reservation - she said she knew both sides. "I know what I'm going to do, I'm going to be educated and I'm going to work," she said. Another one told me her grandparents

were white and that when she was a teenager her mother and father took her aside and said, "You have the choice to grow up in a white world or a native world, now you make the choice." She said, "I made the choice to be a native and I'm happy I did. I grew up in a native world." So what interested me was that these people had made these decisions about who they are and seemed to be quite in control of their lives. The idea is that so many are lost. There are those who are lost but this seems to be a very different class from some of the others. They know who they are.

When they go back home, these students may very well become be important members of their communities. But why is it, asked this teacher, that when these future leaders move into our colleges, they become so quiet? However, at Heritage, the students are now beginning to become much more vocal.

> Leaders in their communities, they organize events, they organize the community, they meet visiting dignitaries...and then they come here and "fade into the walls" and are quiet and won't do anything. What a metamorphosis! And now they're starting to speak out in the college community.

What should those teachers do who feel it would be wrong to impose an alien culture on aboriginal students, but who nevertheless are determined to serve those students in the best possible way? This participant's remarks show the fine line such teachers walk, and how she defines the term "native education":

> I would be loathe to try to superimpose my world view yet ,teaching, of course, that's what it's all about. So I'm always in trepidation. It's a very scary role in that sense. And to the extent that they, as individuals, want to maintain any of their culture or whatever is there, I don't want to tread on it. Or I want to tread very lightly. Or I want them to tell me what they want from me and I try to figure out how I can provide it. So for me, that's what native education is about.

2. The Time is Right!

At the beginning of this section, I quoted a participant who pointed out that college education is quite new for aboriginal peoples. In the 1960's, the number of Inuit at university could be counted on one hand. Residential schools proved not only to be a failure but worse. In so many cases, they were places of physical, psychological and sexual abuse. Now, though, we see a new trend for native students to attend post-secondary institutions. If they have to attend non-native institutions, then surely we must do everything we can to ensure that this new trend does not prove to be an abysmal failure.

At Heritage College, I was made aware that several teachers, involved for years with aboriginal students, saw the time as ripe for action:

> And all these years we've been afraid to say and do things and make a mistake, so we do nothing. I think that's where I am in terms of the college. It's time to make some mistakes. It's time to get out there and try. It's time to venture out and not just sit there and say, "Oh, but we'll ghettoize them, we shouldn't do anything." How do we know what they want, or how to do the right thing or whatever? I want to try some things.

One reason for this teacher's impatience comes from the lack of support programmes available to the students. Consequently, a situation exists whereby in at least one discipline:

> [We] let them in and now that we've tested we know that they can't pass. But we're not doing anything about it. We're just putting them in courses and letting them fail. Now the odd ones surprise you, you know. They rise above expectations, but it's very rare.

It reminds me of another comment, or rather cry from the heart, when a participant asked: "Are we just going to call them cannon fodder and say we're going to put seventy-five through the system in the hopes that one will graduate?"

As we examine in a later chapter, Heritage College has recently taken measures to address the needs of native students to help them be more successful academically. This confirms the pressing need for special programmes to support aboriginal students.

3. Should We Treat Them Differently?

Just about every teacher alluded to the question of whether they should treat aboriginal students differently. Opinions ranged from the teacher who maintained that: "I treat them just like any other students, I make absolutely no difference between them and behave the same way to all of them regardless of background," to the teacher who believes it would be racist of her not to recognize their differences. Several teachers emphasized that their concern to teach well to native students has made them better teachers for all their students.

Not all teachers would agree, though, that any students need, or should receive, different treatment for any reason. Elaborating his belief that he treats all students the same, one participant recounted:

> I can honestly say I behave the same way to all students regardless o. background. I have a student with cerebral palsy, and as I showed slides for the quiz, I left them on longer than I normally would have as she was still writing. That bothered me. That I made that concession, which held up thirty-nine other people.

Compare that with the following where the teacher talked of his perception that he should be "chasing after" the native students and felt he should be treating them differently because of their different needs:

> I do treat some students differently from others. Not because they're native students but because they have some special need. I have a [hearing impaired] student who has special needs. I make a copy of my notes for him, and meet him after class and we go over things and I spend a lot of time, which I don't have, on him. And I don't see why I shouldn't spend extra time on others.. There are [other groups] of students with lots of problems...It just becomes one more group that requires more time, and increasingly it's getting hard to do it.

Another makes it clear that while he would not treat native students differently as a group, he believes that teachers must:

> Be very sensitive. Just as sensitive to people's feelings as you possibly can. That's the first and most important thing. Most people aren't. But that goes for people of our own families and culture, let alone people who are quite different. So that's the first thing we all have to learn.

Like other participants, during his interview this person at first seemed to be saying that he treats all students the same. But as he continued, like the following teacher and many others, he made it clear that this does not mean that he had immutable rules for all students so much as that he allowed for exceptions to the rules for all students.

> I can't honestly say rightly or wrongly that I teach the students any differently one from another apart from the fact that they're all individuals, and what might work for one doesn't necessarily work for another.

Another participant puts forward a similar viewpoint. She began by telling me that she permitted her aboriginal students to take extra time with their papers. As I questioned her, however, I discovered that she allows other students to do that too:

> I have to admit I'm very flexible with them. Well, I tend to be flexible with all my students. I don't say if that paper is late I'm never looking at it...I have dyslexics. I do it for any student who has a reason for not performing so quickly.

Consistently, teachers who initially mentioned the "different" treatment they gave native students said that they would treat any other student in this "different" way too. For example, warned by advisors that most native students find being asked questions ("put on the spot") embarrassing, one teacher admitted:

> I'm more nervous of asking them a question in class than I am of other students. And unless they have sort of proved they're more willing to come out with something, I don't look to them, except for [one who usually participates verbally]...But again, having said that, I think I pick up when certain students want to be left alone and I do so.

A different teacher, however, notes that several native students came to see her to say, "We're a little shy. We're certainly very shy to speak out in front of the class. We're slightly less shy to speak with a small group of people, but you must understand that it's our second language and we're not very good at it." The teacher reassured the students that if they couldn't answer a question, the teacher would pass quickly on to the next student. Unlike her colleague, this teacher had no hesitation about "putting native students on the spot" and believed the students to be comfortable with this.

In several ways, native students face the same difficulties as many non-native students, maintained several teachers. And their presence reminds us that teachers cannot teach as if their clientèle came from a homogeneous, classless society.

> So many of the positive and negative, they share with other students. So I don't think you say "us and them" or "the native students and the others." But we have an obligation as teachers to try to teach everybody in our classes.

A teacher who sees her duty this way recounted how she adapted her teaching methodology, using lots of study guides, teaching aids, and reconsidered her evaluation techniques.

> I had to acknowledge that all students may not be able to pass the test even though they have studied for it, read the work and so on, and that if students were ever going to get through the system I had to provide ways to go back, ways they could do a supplemental paper.

Many teachers owned to dealing with this issue of whether to treat students differently or not on a case-by-case basis, which worried some, but not others.

> I do bend the rules a lot. I don't believe in watering down a course, giving them a pass, but when I talk about the work, sometimes it's not what's in my course outline. It could be something else.

Yet this teacher does not just "bend the rules" for native students. She bends them for all students. When native students do not turn up for a test, she gives them alternative assignments so they can still pass the course.

> What I often do is assign a project, or essay, or library information paper based on the information they had to study for on that test, so it's not like they're going to get zero. They can still make up the marks.

This accommodation, though, turns out to be not only for native students, for when I asked her, "Would you do that for any student?" she replied:

> Yes, because there's always that problem that teachers might have a double standard. You might hear around college that the aboriginal students get away with murder, that their marks are not reflective of what other people's marks are...But it's with the student who's getting like 10 on 100. There's no point in keep giving them these exams and not showing them how to work in the textbook and get the answers out.

I should not like to give the impression of unanimity and equanimity where it does not exist. Not all teachers feel at ease with their present solution to the problem and several find themselves still struggling with the issue. This teacher was amongst those who wrestles constantly to walk a fine line.

> You want to give them a break, to be a bit more lenient because you know they're having a hard time to adjust. On the other hand, you don't want to be too unfair to other people giving these people breaks and others not...So I find that hard to deal with. I find it hard to find a balance between being fair to native students while at the same time being fair to the non-native students in things like this.

The question of whether or not to treat native students differently spills over into teachers' personal lives as they meet them outside the college setting. Glimpses of humour emerge as one teacher described her confusion about whether or not to greet native students riding on the same bus.

> When I saw them on the bus, I really didn't know what to do. Should I greet them? Is that rude in their culture? Well, anyway, I believe they

> also have to learn to function in our culture, so I should greet them. Besides, if I don't greet them, it gets very complicated. Don't they expect me to, knowing it's in my culture to greet them? So if I didn't greet them, wouldn't they think I was being rude by the rules of my culture?

Several teachers made the point that, although aboriginal students may differ in some respects from other students, they also have many things in common. All students share their student status; some native and non-natives share poverty; others share different abilities. Our job as teachers, maintained the following participant, is to teach in a way suitable to all of these different students.

> Some of the problems that aboriginal students face have to do with poverty. So they share that with other students. They don't have the books when they should have the books because they can't afford them...So I don't think you can say us and them or the native students and the others. But we have an obligation as teachers to try to teach everybody in our classes.

Finally, a participant remarked on the need for all of us to realize that the student population is not a white, homogeneous, English-first-language mass. Therefore, she told me, teachers have to adjust to this reality.

> Yes, I do think that aboriginal students may need something special, but I think they're in the same boat as lots of other students, so when I offer it to them, I offer it to everybody...So I've had to make adjustments or else we have a system that one population can never get through.

Many teachers alluded to this fact of a changing student population. And many, too, had found that their efforts to make themselves more successful teachers of native students had consequently resulted in their becoming better teachers for all their students.

CHAPTER V. SEEKING STRATEGIES AND FINDING SOME SOLUTIONS

In the previous chapter, many of the teachers appeared perplexed about their role in teaching aboriginal students. Some, though, expressed the conviction that their task was to empower the students, while others added that we must act now to give the aboriginal students the kind of services they deserve. Most teachers questioned whether or not they should be treating native students differently from their other students. Most of these, we saw, ended up being more flexible for all their students. During their discussions, many participants referred to the changing composition of the classroom. In fact, as we see here, several teachers believe that, as they search for strategies and find solutions to help the native students in their classes, they become better teachers for all their students.

1. Everyone Benefits

Native students have given several teachers a creative shock as tried and tested pedagogical methods fell flat. Some teachers, seeking to understand what was going on, why the foundations of their pedagogical universe quaked, have responded by questioning all kinds of assumptions. They feel revitalized through the experience of opening themselves up to new ways of seeing the world.

> All our usual teaching strategies that we've used were being challenged. We were having to think about, okay, why do we have people write journals? And there are some very valid reasons. But it also made us think that maybe there are other ways to evaluate what people are getting out of the course.

The entire college community could benefit from the new perspective these students bring us, stated one John Abbott teacher; they could prove to be the impetus for all of us to begin questioning the assumptions we use in class. Many teachers made similar comments, concluding from their experience along these lines: "So I think it's made me a better teacher generally by meeting the needs of the aboriginal students but without a different set of standards or whatever."

Several teachers concurred that, by their presence and the teachers' concern for them, the native students have provided a stimulus for the teachers to improve their teaching overall.

> It began to seem to me that everything I learned, or had been told to do for these students, is good for all students. They didn't have any special needs vis-à-vis my teaching that the other students didn't have, too.

> Anything I did as a teacher to make life easier for native students would make life easier for all students.

The presence of native students, so different in many ways from mainstream students, spurred several teachers to reconsider and renew their teaching methods. Some of those teachers only became aware of the global benefit to all students as they talked to me in their interview, like this participant:

> I've had really good experiences teaching here lately and I think it's because I've changed my teaching habits and geared them to native students. I think that's what it is. I hadn't really thought about it quite that way except when [you] said come and talk about teaching methods and so...Then I thought about it a little. It never occurred to me until maybe this past week, that what I'm doing for the native students has an impact on the other students.

Once again, I must warn that these sentiments are not held by all. A few teachers mentioned to me that at times colleagues thought they went "too far" in their efforts with native students. How far should we go in being supportive? One participant answers thus:

> And you wonder what the boundary is between teaching and parenting. I look at it like just being caring in this big impersonal world.

2. Teaching Methods

One participant who would, I am sure, agree with the above sentiment, pointed to the fact that she has had to discover and implement a whole new panoply of teaching techniques. She is convinced that using a wide range of teaching techniques profits all her students.

> I think there's no such thing as treating [students] all the same. Even if we think we do, we don't. And it's folly to think we can treat each one individually. So you're caught either way. I think what I've had to do over the years is to modify my courses in acknowledging the fact that students learn in different ways. Not just aboriginal, but all students. So I need to provide a multitude of teaching techniques and not just assume that I can stand up there and lecture, and everyone's going to get it, whether they're aboriginal or not. And I think that was useful to all the students, not just the aboriginal students, to change that.

The section which follows reflects the experiences of teachers as they point to what techniques they have found work well, and not so well, with native students. This kind of exchange, writes Don Sawyer of the Native Adult

Education Resource Centre in Salmon Arm, B.C., serves individuals better than looking for answers to the question as to how native students learn. In his article entitled "Native Learning Styles: Shorthand for Instructional Adaptations?" he maintains we should be looking instead for answers to the question, "What teaching accommodations have proven most effective in helping native students succeed in educational settings?" (1991: 103). The next part of this report attempts to reproduce some of the answers that the college teachers have found.

At this point readers should be warned that teachers' comments do not always fall neatly into hermetic categories. Comments relating to one theme overlap into another. Reality is far more holistic than analytical processes imposed on it. I have thus brought together comments made by teachers relating both to their teaching style and to their evaluation methods. While they are not the same, teaching style and evaluation techniques clearly intermesh. I attempted to make the distinction, though, to reflect the point made by this and other teachers:

> If I have one native student in my class of forty-four, well, I'm sort of more sensitive to it, so I'd ask the native student, "How are you doing? Why don't you come for help?" and things like that. Otherwise I'm not changing my teaching style. But when I was going to [teach a class of native students only] I sort of slightly modified my teaching style. Now, I wouldn't do that just for one student in a class of forty-four.

Occasionally, in both institutions, teachers have taught classes for which only native students have registered. "Oh, it's so different," exclaimed one participant, more used to mixed classes. Moreover, teachers can adapt their teaching style to fit a different learning style.

> The way we learn, we understand the world...is deductive logic. They're inductive. They learn by doing. They're six, seven years old out there travelling around learning how to do the things. This is inductive, this is something else. So I figure I'll go from their strengths and then introduce things that are the opposite instead of always assuming that the way we all understand the world is this way. And that you have something wrong with you if you don't agree.

Much of the literature dealing with "native learning styles" hints that teachers should use more visual aids and cater to what many believe to be a more native way of learning by using more modelling behaviour.

Both Don Sawyer and Judith Kleinfeld, two practitioners with vast experience in the field of native education, disagree with much of this emphasis on learning styles. Sawyer agrees with Kleinfeld who "takes much of this research to task." He concurs with her argument that "the real value of research into native learning patterns...does not lie...in telling teachers to "match" instruction to

high/low verbal ability patterns. It lies rather in helping teachers understand the cultural context in which they are working so that they can respond with better judgement" (1991: 101). He goes on to state that in Kleinfeld's view it is more useful to look at teaching approaches that teachers have found work with native students. Such approaches rarely include visually-based instructional techniques." (1991: 101)

Nevertheless, several teachers mentioned that they have decided to produce more visual material. Asked what she would tell new teachers of native students, this participant responded:

> I would be able to tell [other teachers] now that they have to spend more time on the things they have to have. Give them things visually...If you give it to them to take away, simplify it...You also have to speak slower because - well, you have to now, anyway, with mixed students.

Another teacher emphasized the technique of modelling a skill owing to her frustration at not being able to "read" her students. She has found that this technique enables her to see if the students have understood how to apply the new skills.

> And I found that I would have to do a lot more with them...and more demonstrating than talking...They learn by doing. So that's why they were successful in [my subject]. We did, did, did all the time, lots of practice.

Other close observers of Indian education, Barman et al., in their article, "The Challenge of Indian Education: An Overview," speak of the importance of teaching in ways congruent with traditional Indian learning styles in their discussion of Indian control of education. Interestingly, they see parallels between this and new Western teaching styles presently being adopted. The success of Indian teacher-education programmes, they argue, is that:

> Indian teachers tend to utilize a cluster of teaching strategies which are consistent with Indian cultures. For example, Indian teachers provide many opportunities for students to initiate interaction and learning with each other and with the teacher. Direct questioning is rare as are show-and-tell type speech events. (My emphasis.) Small peer groups and individual work are much more frequent than are teacher-directed small groups and plenary sessions. Pupil-centered classrooms are characteristic of Indian teaching styles, which is congruent with innovative teaching styles currently developing in Western education (1987a: 13).

2.a "Spotlighting" Students

Harking back to the fact that almost all teachers spoke of the tendency of native students to be quiet in their classes, it is not surprising to read in much of the literature about teaching native children that many of them hesitate to put themselves forward in class by asking or answering questions, or by standing in front of the class to do presentations. What these teachers have noticed concurs with the "interference theory," which posits that native children do not speak much in the classroom because it is not structured in a way that allows them to display their verbal learning.

While so many teachers point to the quietness of native students, it would be wrong to assume that public speaking does not have an important place in many native American cultures; or that native people cannot speak in public today. We regularly see and hear high-profile native spokespersons like Ovide Mercredi, George Erasmus, Matthew Coon-Come and Mary Simon who speak with an eloquence unmatched by most, if not all, of our current non-native politicians. Traditionally, Mohawks and other Six Nations people held the art of speaking in high repute; orators merited as much, if not more, status than warriors. Dan Georgakas in The Broken Hoop, reports: "The Seneca orator Red Jacket, who lived during the era of the American Revolution, became indignant when asked what he had done as a warrior, "A warrior not! I am an orator! I was born an orator!" (1973: 5)

Nevertheless, almost all observers have remarked that native students do not respond if they are "put on the spot." Warned that most native students find being asked questions ("spotlighted") embarrassing, one teacher believed: "I'm more nervous of asking them a question in class than I am of other students. And unless they have sort of proved they're more willing to come out with something, I don't look to them."

Another teacher has fewer qualms about asking native students direct questions if she has come to know them through office visits. "And I find that once they've done that, they seem to be far more confident in class."

Not all teachers reach this conclusion, though. Another notes that she does not "feel authorized to 'pull them out' in the same way I feel required to 'pull out' every other student." She does not want them to feel uncomfortable.

Finally, on this topic, the next teacher confided that "I've tried a lot of different things and can't see myself as the expert on anything." But, she went on to tell me, she rarely, if ever, uses the technique of "spotlighting" individual students because she has learned that her native students like to think more about their answer. "So you can't expect them in class to give you an answer, because often they would like to have a few minutes and what they say really counts for

something. It's very important to them and they won't speak just for the sake of saying something." She has worked out a different way of including them. If she is talking about something she knows they have worked on, she says something like:

> Actually, Robbie, you'd probably have a lot of comments about this because you're doing that book...So I include them and use their name in class a lot, and they nod. But I never say, "Tell us the main points," because I'm sure that at that point, they might start to feel uncomfortable. But I use their names, and lots of eye contact. So they know that I know. And there's eyebrows going up and down, and body language.

2.b Presentations

Many observers have reported on the emphasis native cultures place on listening rather than talking in order to learn, on not pushing yourself forward but acting to promote and maintain group harmony. Couple these kinds of learned values and attitudes with the difficulties of attending college in a second language, living in a different culture and the on-going tensions of a fundamentally racist society, and we should not be surprised that native students tend to shy away from doing presentations and dislike being put on the spot. We know that presentations pose difficulties for many students, not just native students. Counsellors have often reported cases of students - native and non-native - who systematically dropped classes because they required presentations.

At both Heritage and John Abbott, counsellors who work closely with native students have advised teachers that presentations may act as a major cultural obstacle to those students. Teachers have responded in different ways. One teacher spent a lot of time thinking this over before presenting various options to the students , including being responsible for that part of the course by bringing in a guest speaker themselves. In the end, the students did their presentation, which was well received by the other students. During the interview, the teacher remarked that of course, presentations are difficult for other students too. But she has no qualms about pulling things out from them, or getting them to do things. Orthodox Muslim female students also see presentations as culturally inappropriate, she noted, but as they have no one "speaking on their behalf," teachers tend to treat them as they do other students.

Most teachers accept, or positively encourage, native students to do presentations on issues close and important to them:

> They will all do these in groups of two or three. And, in fact, the native students were the first ones to come to me and give me a title or theme.

> The Cree are going to do their own culture, and the Inuit too. Not all of them, but two groups.

Teachers tended to emphasize that they explained to their native students how much of a resource they were, and how valuable their contribution was to the class:

> There was a poem about the north and so I could in a sense use them as experts...They felt good. They didn't feel weird. They felt that they were resources in that moment. When they started to talk about being up north, the class started to look and they were fixed: they were hearing personal stories and they were listening to people who had interesting stories to tell.

Many teachers told similar stories, emphasizing that when they persuaded native students to do class presentations based on their own culture, they usually managed to do them successfully, the other students showed interest, and the presenters themselves felt quite proud afterwards.

Sometimes, though, the students feel they simply cannot do the presentation. When this happens, how do teachers handle it? One teacher, who finds it "awful" that she deals with these issues on a case-by-case basis, reported how she responded to native students who told her they did not want to do a presentation:

> They said they really didn't want to do that, but could they come and present it to me? Happily, there were another couple of students who said they didn't want to do that either, and so all five of us...[made a small group].

Like so many other college requirements, giving presentations probably comes more easily after the students have spent some time in college, adjusting to the culture shock and different norms. This teacher believes that forcing first-year native students to do presentations can be really traumatic for them.

> You do see a change [over time]. I think that in that first year...it's very helpful to avoid things that make the students uncomfortable. Like presentations, like singling them out in class, asking them directly to answer a question. For most of the students, I think that's true. But at the same time, I think that what they need is to learn to develop those skills, maybe out of the classroom situation, separate from the classroom situation, so that in the second and third year, they can feel more comfortable doing presentations, talking about their own culture, or whatever. Because I really found that once the students can do that, it increases their self-esteem. It's fantastic...I think the students are really

> pushed into these things in the first and second semester without the right kind of preparation. It scares them and that's when you get people leaving.

Another teacher remembered how he dealt with this situation and in retrospect came up with a solution that other teachers have similarly hit upon:

> And that's another thing I recall. I might have created more problems by excusing them from their presentation. From treating them as though they were different, even though they are different, because they're reticent about talking in public, let's say. So I had S do it first. She didn't talk at any length, but she talked for two minutes and then I asked her questions which she could answer in one word. And she did that and then everybody was very pleased...Then the others did their presentation, much shorter, more modest. But they did it. Nobody got up and cried, ran out. I've had other students probably run out with vomit bags. So in that sense it wasn't any different; it was probably a bit better than students from this culture. So what does it mean? You have to be careful. You have to find ways to get at people, to get them to share their ideas. And I agree that talking in front of a group is very intimidating so you have to work on it. Maybe it would have been better if we'd had presentations in groups of six. In this case, it was a group of fifteen.

In classes where all students are aboriginal, teachers reported, they had more success getting the students to speak out in class. The students support each other and the positive experience gained means that they are more likely to give a presentation in another class during their college career. The teacher remarked that, for the students: "The power, the empowerment of doing a presentation is so exciting...And the pride that they have in the work that they've done for this presentation."

These students, probably more than non-native students, however, fear doing a presentation and will tend to want to drop courses that require such an assignment. If they do agree to do a presentation, though: "They make sure they do it in a group, or with one other native student."

Asked if she agreed with some people who argue that presentations constitute a major cultural obstacle to native students, one participant explained how her own realization of this led her to devise other strategies:

> I know students who packed up and went back north rather than give their Monday a.m. paper. They've actually quit college because they knew their date was coming up. I quit doing it for all students...I have them read a book, for example, and summarize the book in a couple of pages, take that sheet and meet in [small] groups and talk about their book

> in that group, but I don't grade them on that. I grade them on the written work....Sometimes I do a panel....So what I've done is look for ways for all students to avoid standing up and giving a presentation: panels, or doing it in a small group.

Like this individual, more and more teachers are finding other ways of dealing with presentations than having one or two students stand in front of the class, and are thinking again about their evaluation requirements.

Yet another teacher recounted how one student who "always had that kind of stony look" embarked on a research project which culminated in her joining a class panel. She was a shy student who never talked in class but was very bright and capable; evidently she felt less threatened by the task of participating in a panel than standing alone in front of a large group. Here is the teacher's account:

> She sits in class with a very stern face, looking straight ahead. She's very studious, always in class, never misses, but never contributes anything. But when this came along, it was like day and night. Something clicked and off she went.

2.c Dates and Deadlines

Does it really matter if an assignment is handed in two weeks' late? Many native students cannot see why this should be important. The Euro-Canadian concept of time as an object which can be manipulated: stretched, cut, saved, wasted, stand still, and as a thing important in itself stands in opposition to native ideas of doing something "when the time is right."

At Heritage College especially, time emerged as a major area of cultural conflict. Should teachers treat native students differently because their cultures conceive of time so differently? One participant related how, when he changed his attitude to time, allowing the native students considerable leeway in choosing when to do tasks, they accomplished those tasks. All got done with good humour and in a pleasant atmosphere. Previously, he perceived native students as "lacking in initiative." However, when he allowed them to take charge, "the initiative issue was no longer an issue. Things just happened. They had the initiative and I think a big part of it was that they were included right from the beginning in some of the decision-making processes."

Finally, the same teacher described an eye-opening event which changed his assumptions. Initially he believed that these students were just lazy, because things were not happening, but later he realized that : "What I wasn't seeing was that it would have happened, but not necessarily when I wanted it to happen."

Perhaps largely due to this different notion of time, teachers noted a marked tendency for aboriginal students to miss deadlines for essays, tests and other assignments. While many non-native students share this trait, it certainly seems pronounced for most native students. This has led some teachers to examine their own rationale for needing assignments in "on time;" a few saw no problem in having students decide on when to do particular assignments:

> I'm doing these tests and assignments with certain due dates because otherwise most students would never get these things done. But otherwise I've decided it doesn't really have to be done at a certain pace and a certain time as long as it's done by the time the class ends and the course is over.

Participants made known to me their frustration with many native students not doing work on time, thus putting the teachers in the position of deciding whether or not they can allow make-ups of any kind.

> There have been some situations where a native student has done most of the work, most of the assignments, tests, and come the final exam they won't do it, for some reason. They'll give some excuse. And I say, "If you don't do it you'll fail." (Exams are worth 30 or 40% of the final grade.) And they say, "Oh well, if that's it, that's it." Or...they just have to do one more thing to pass the course and for some reason, they won't show up and they won't do it. They seem to give up without a fight or struggle.

Another teacher now provides various ways for all students to show that they have acquired the necessary information, including allowing them to do a take-home exam to make-up for a missed test. She makes them work at it until they get 90% or 100%. She explained her rationale.

> Then I don't give them 90% for that. I'll probably give them a 60%. But I feel they've done the work, they're understanding the work better and this test, I know, will be useful for studying for the final.

Curiously, I have not so far found any reference in the literature on native students and education to this issue of meeting deadlines. Perhaps this is due to the fact that most writers talk about elementary and high schools rather than post-secondary institutions?

2.d Study Guides and Teaching Aids

Different teachers have worked out various strategies to teach more effectively to native students. One recounted how she adapted her teaching methods, using lots of study guides and teaching aids. She also reconsidered her evaluation techniques.

> So I had to begin to be very specific, give an exam with review questions, study guides, so students would have a chance to know how to study for a test. Be very specific about the kinds of questions, or the way to approach studying. To give a lot of study guides within class, a lot of vocabulary. A lot of teaching aids, a lot of teaching that doesn't happen at university. I think this is important regardless of whether you're aboriginal or not. But it's been highlighted by the fact that I think it's immoral to have a class where you only teach ten or twenty and the rest are sitting there with glazed eyes.

We saw previously that many teachers found that all the strategies they hit upon to instruct their native students more effectively inevitably meant that they had become better teachers for all their students. In the following case one teacher made several modifications:

> Well, I changed, you know, but I had one or two [native students]. And I give out now about ten times the number of handouts as I did prior to having them because I figured the more I could give them to take home to look at, the better it was. I used to think people should be able to take notes and I would give an overhead and the points and discuss it like that. Now everything that I think I really want them to get to look at after class, I put on handouts. And I pass out more handouts and then I say, "you've really got to look and understand this one, etc." And I try to slow down the pace and emphasize the more important points. All this was basically, I think, because we had the Cree and we were gearing up to have them and make them succeed. Even though I didn't stop and think, I know I really changed.

She went on to add that by developing these techniques of giving more handouts, she has become a better teacher for all her students. Another teacher also mentioned that she had slowed the pace since "they find it difficult to write notes and listen to me talk, and try to think of answers while I'm talking...So I go slower now, and don't have so many words on the overhead." Both of these teachers spoke of "slowing down the pace," and thus each has hit upon something to which many experts refer. They have noticed that native teachers "pace" the class more slowly than non-native teachers. This does not mean, though, that they necessarily cover less material.

2.e Multiple-Choice Exams

Teachers setting multiple-choice exams have noticed in some disciplines that they may be testing not the native students' comprehension of the material so much as their vocabulary. One teacher noted that such tests create problems for students in the first year especially.

> They get locked into certain words and they think every question is a trick question, so they take hours reading this one sentence over and over again to try and find the trick while most of my exams are very straightforward...They get locked into a word and they forget the meaning of that word. And that word is a stupid little word like "simultaneous," you know. And if you don't know the translation of that word, you can't answer the question. And that has nothing to do with knowing that material or not.

Thinking about this issue leads the teachers to realize that the problem of testing language rather than concepts holds for other students, too, not just natives. Another teacher in a different discipline spoke of her similar experience:

> A lot of our exams are multiple-choice and I sometimes wonder if the phraseology is understood by them. Because there's a double bind here: there's the colloquialisms and language we use and this vocabulary. So they really, I was going to say they have more of a problem, but that's not true because we have a lot of students right now whose mother tongue is not English...it's as much a problem for them.

Multiple-choice exams may also test a student's knowledge of culture as well as language and content, as we saw in the story reported in Chapter III when all the Cree nursing students gave the "wrong" answer to a question on how people react under stress.

On the whole it seems as if the presence of native students has encouraged teachers to re-evaluate their testing methods. They have become more aware of the need to vet their multiple-choice exams to ensure that they really do test the students' knowledge of the material and not their grasp of vocabulary. They have also made teachers aware of the cultural bias inherent in many of their exams.

2.f Journals

In Chapter II, we heard several teachers voice their frustration at feeling out of touch with their native students because they found them very quiet and unwilling to ask or answer questions in class. However, several teachers found that, while they may not be able to "read" their students' body language, they can read their thoughts well and stay in contact by using journals. Teachers have used journals in a wide variety of disciplines with great success.

A sociology teacher found that her students "used them lots." They took class notes on one side of the journal and wrote their comments on the other side. They could say such things as, "This isn't true for my culture" or "I disagree with

this." A math teacher spoke of how all her students in her remedial class benefitted from this technique, which required an great deal of extra work on her part.

> I decided, because of the nature of this class, to have them write math journals, to keep a math journal every week, everybody. This has proved to be a blessing with the native students because they don't talk to me. They don't talk to me outside of class. They sit together; they don't talk to anyone except each other, but they write me long things in their journal. Starting with the very first journal, one of the girls who has since dropped out wrote to me that she came from a very small town, she told me the name of the town, and how many people lived there and wrote, "Please don't ask me any questions in class or ask me anything about it because I'll feel really embarrassed." And a couple of others have mentioned that in their journals:..they really want to keep a low profile in class. Which is sort of not inconsistent with a native way of learning, I think, where it's considered a little rude to answer questions or stare at someone who's questioning. So that was one of the big things I learned from keeping a journal. It was wonderful for the native students. All my students are benefitting apart from a couple of boys who don't care one way or the other. But the native students are really talking to me in their journals .

The same teacher uses the feedback in those journals to assess how well the students are understanding the material. If she finds out that they are not grasping it, she tries a different teaching technique and thus finds she teaches more effectively:

> I started off doing it abstractly but found out when I read their journals how many people I had lost by doing that. That's one of the real benefits of doing the journal. And I found out before the next class because a whole bunch of people had told me they didn't understand. And I realized I had to find another way of doing it, so I went back to a much more concrete way.

We can see, then, that a consensus emerges on journals as a successful technique for keeping in touch with native students and that teachers in a wide range of disciplines have used them. Similarly, a participant spoke of her use of "free writes" in every class. The students write for five or ten minutes on a theme set by the teacher. It could be their reaction to a documentary film, or an article they have read, or something else. Told that they will not, in this instance, lose marks for grammar or spelling mistakes, most native - and non-native - students give the teacher useful feedback in this manner. A variation on this theme is to use computer mail. Scollon and Scollon in "Face in Interethnic Telecommunications at the University of Alaska: Computer conferencing as Non-focused Interaction" found computer mail a very effective way of eliciting communication from

Athabaskan students. "Students who said nothing in the first couple of classes took off with the computer conference. Other students began to notice that they had something worthwhile to say and paid more attention to them" (1988: 190).

3. Course Content

Adapting - or not adapting - course content to make it more relevant to native students emerged as a much more vibrant and contentious topic at Heritage than at John Abbott. At Heritage, most teachers referred to it spontaneously as an issue that came very much to mind when thinking about native students. I believe much of the disparity between teachers' comments in the two colleges can be explained by the difference in the proportion of native students at each establishment. If almost every section of core subjects in John Abbott contained about five native students, then surely there would be more awareness, pressure - and, indeed, dissension - surrounding this issue.

One participant suggested an exercise for teachers to try to understand how difficult it is for native students to attend our colleges. Imagine the situation reversed, she said:

> If [teachers] could just imagine sending their own children to a Cree college, and everything is in reverse. And they're being taught only Cree culture, and being told, "This is the way it is." If only people could try to see the reverse sometimes, maybe it would help them look at their own course content.

The reader may recall that when teachers spoke about their teaching styles, several remarked that they believed the changes they had made to accommodate native students made them better teachers for all their students. Similarly, in the discussions of their course material, several teachers noted that the presence of native students in the classroom helps them constantly question and adapt their course content. Speaking of the curriculum in one subject, a teacher pondered:

> This traditional approach is really leaving them further and further behind. And we've got to do something really revolutionary here with English. But the native kids are sort of the extreme example of it because it was never part of their culture. But it's becoming less and less part of the average kid's culture as well.

Teachers constantly pointed to the changing composition of their clientèle as a reason why they have felt obliged to adjust and change the content of their courses. As our students become increasingly multicultural, we can rely on fewer and fewer "givens" e.g. that all know the story of Adam and Eve. Add to this the increasing age gap as the teachers largely remain in place, and we can see

why it is, as one participant pointed out that, for examples to make sense, they must come from the students.

Participants talked of how they try to make their course content relevant to all students, and particularly to native students either generally or specifically, by encouraging them to do presentations and papers on issues of importance to them, such as what is happening in their communities. They might also include examples, like swaddling or traditional medicine, in their lectures.

> So I would encourage it in anything, everything has to be relevant for the student. What's the point in studying something if it has no meaning for you? So I try as much as I can in any class to encourage them to adapt, to participate.

While most people I interviewed made these kinds of comments, I would remind readers that they do not necessarily reflect the opinion of all teachers. At Heritage, opinion appears far from unanimous on the question of what kinds of adjustments should be made to accommodate native students. So far at John Abbott there has been little debate on these issues in the college community at large. But there is no reason to suppose that such a debate would lead to an instantaneous meeting of the minds.

Thus, while most teachers I spoke to reflected on the need to change and adapt their course content, the next teacher of social sciences disagreed, arguing: "There is a body of knowledge and it's my job to make sure [the students] know it." Disagreements revolved around this issue particularly. While some teachers strongly believed in the necessity for changes to course content, others wondered how they can "cater to special interest groups and yet maintain standards."

One participant, while willing to adapt his course content to make it more relevant to native students, pointed to the fact that institutional policies often militate against this, since the vagaries of scheduling through computers means that teachers do not know who is in their class until they meet them. "The computer decides, the schedule decides." Because of this, he maintained: "The topic or the courses we teach sometimes shuts the whole door off to that creativity which could exist among the native people."

In his report, Accueil et intégration des étudiants amérindiens au cégep de Sept-Iles: rapport d'expérimentation 1989-90, Jacques Delagrave documents the passage of Innu students through the Cégep de Sept-Iles. Here, the Innu students' difficulty with and alienation from traditional European philosophical thought led to the establishment of two special courses, with the approval of the Direction générale de l'enseignement collégial (DGEC). The 101 Philosophy course, Philosophy, Thought, Speech, has been replaced by Native American Logic and Thought; the 201 Philosophy, People and their Environment, has been

replaced by Native American Philosophy and Amerindian Culture. These institutional courses received the approval of DGEC in 1989. As well, the compulsory language courses have been adapted to provide French-second-language courses and Montagnais courses for the native students; a Physical Education course has also been adapted.

To the outsider, the question of course content appears to have been less problematic at this college. Delagrave notes in his report that "teachers presented to DGEC several research projects concerned with developing course content geared to aboriginal interests to be presented in the Native American Studies Programme" (my translation, 1991: 9). He adds, however, that these courses were given to homogeneous groups, as were most concentration courses. The Programme, though, was to be revised to conform to the new social science curriculum, and now the aboriginal students will take their social science courses in mixed classes.

When we consider the experiences reported at the Cégep de Sept-Iles, it is hardly surprising that teachers in our two colleges find that traditional Western philosophy and culture does not hold much appeal for native students, as this participant recounted.

> For example, Socrates and Plato have less appeal...to native students. They can't relate to Greek philosophy...Of course, the average non-native student has difficulty dealing with Plato and Socrates, too, but at least historically or culturally, consciously or unconsciously, they belong to a tradition where this is part of their history.

Courses on philosophy at cégep, like most other courses, ignore any contribution of native people, deny their specificity, and assume that native students share a way of thinking about the world based on very different principles.

> The real issue here is - I don't want to go back to Socrates and Plato - but this is right to the issue of boring a person with someone that they can't even spell, can't relate to, is not part of their life. Most of the philosophical tradition we have doesn't go beyond Québec city northwise. Historically, the last two or three hundred years we don't have anything in terms of philosophy that goes northwards...Is it that there is no thinking? No ideas? Sure there are.

Are we not engaged in a Teaching of the Absurd, asks this next participant. We bring students from the bush, then ask them to write papers on Beowulf, Charles Dickens, the Industrial Revolution, and so on.

> How can we bring these people from the bush, put them in local housing, teach them disciplines redolent with Eurocentric principles and thought, and then wonder whether we are making sense or not?

For these reasons, several teachers maintain, the least we can do is to include material relevant to aboriginal students. Some agreed that inclusion is imperative "not just for their sake, for other people's sake. Not just giving a Eurocentric point of view...it's very, very important, in my mind, the beliefs and practices of other cultures." Yet another voiced her indignation at the exclusion of native content from courses dealing with Canadian material.

> It's important for Canadians, period, to have native content in their courses whether there are any native students in their classes or not. How dare anybody provide a course in Canadian literature, and not include something about aboriginal literature? It doesn't matter if there are aboriginal people in the course or not. But how much more important it is if a third of your students are from James Bay.

Someone else put it even more strongly, arguing that it is racist not to include the aboriginal people in Canadian course content.

> There's also racism by teachers and it's very implicit. Teachers think they're fair and won't lower their standards. This is the curriculum, it has to be followed and if they're coming here, they have to learn white middle-class curriculum and that's not racist. But I feel it's racist because they're pretty well ignoring a very important part of our culture and ignoring one whole population that's been here thousands of years before we have and pretending it doesn't exist. That's racist. So when we have courses that refuse to even acknowledge the presence of aboriginal people here in Canada...and [they're dealing] with Canadian issues and don't include aboriginal people, to me that's racist.

One participant reported, though, that when he introduced native material into his classes, nothing seemed to change. The native students did not seem any more interested than when they study non-native material. It "doesn't seem to perk them up; it doesn't seem to get them talking any more in class." While he believed that teachers should include all kinds of non-Eurocentric material in their courses, this is not the answer, he thinks. "It's not enough to put in material that's not Eurocentric. It helps. It's necessary but not sufficient to really perk their interest, get them involved in really doing well."

Not all disciplines, though, lend themselves easily to such adjustments and inclusions which help native students feel more at ease with the subject. Psychology, now a compulsory course for social science students, stresses the

individual to an extent that people coming from community-based cultures tend to find difficult, according to some teachers.

Native students made this participant very aware of the cultural bias in psychology. Not only is the subject matter alien to them, but it may even be offensive, clashing with deeply-held beliefs about the respect due to all beings, including the "four-legged." The following comment aptly illustrates the cultural clash.

> They constantly ask: "What does a rat have to do with a person? What do you mean, you just kill a rat when the experiment is over?" They just can't imagine anyone doing that. Animals are brothers, kindred spirits. Everything that is alive deserves respect. And this shows a terrible lack of respect...and a lot of what we do in class clashes with their moral values. And we have the Western scientific approach, where in the name of science, we'll do anything for knowledge, and they're very troubled by this.

It is worth interjecting here that the recent changes made to the social science programme means that courses like Introduction to Psychology, Economics and Sociology, along with History of Western Civilization and method courses have become mandatory. So native students have far less choice than they used to about what courses they take for their diploma.

What does a teacher do when he wants to inject more native content into the course but feels the subject does not lend itself well to this?

> How can I put more native content into the course? Well, when you're talking about a brain, or neuron or nervous system, it just doesn't apply. Right now we're talking about IQ tests and are they culturally fair so I can slip it in, but to me it's always sort of through the backdoor...It always feels to me like it's not hard-core content; it's sort of trying to make the material fit native... So I have this dilemma as a teacher: wanting to work and be successful with the aboriginal students and yet having these classes, where you might have, say, five native students and thirty non-aboriginal students.

But even the teacher who is anxious to include relevant course content for native students and believes that it fits in well, does not necessarily hold the key to feeling a successful teacher of these students. The mysteries and misunderstandings as two cultures meet can persevere in these circumstances too, as the following story illustrates:

> I'd had this idea that maybe M would be able to tell a Cree story because she used to talk to me about these stories. She never told me one, but she

would talk to me about them. And I thought that this would be one way of really getting her involved in the task...And I suddenly realized that I was giving a completely Western way of looking at this student: I'd got terribly excited. "Wow! I have Cree students in this class, and I'll get them to tell these tales. Won't it be wonderful?" And all these other West Island students would say "How great, so this is what these Cree people are about."

I had this idea, but of course, it never got to that because she couldn't tell a story in the way we would tell a story, that would have a beginning, a middle and an end, which is what we're used to...So I realized that there was a real difference between this written culture, which I was expecting her to work from, because that was what we were using in the class, and an oral culture which was, you know, a totally different framework. So we never got around to having this wonderful Cree story in class. And I felt I couldn't tell the story myself second-hand because there would be almost a sacrilegious sense to it.

Also I was questioning my own motives. I wanted her to be part of the class, but I think she would have interpreted it as if I was almost making a mockery a little bit of her culture. Not that she ever gave me that indication, but I think I would have gone too far if I'd ever said: "By the way, we've been meeting a few times outside class and she told me these wonderful stories I'd like to share with you." It almost sounds a bit condescending...So all these ideas, all these resources that I felt were sitting there with these Cree students, I couldn't make use of them, or I didn't know how to make use of them.

I empathize with this teacher. I often feel like that in my own class. One realizes that these students have all kinds of knowledge. We, as teachers, thus want to tap them as resources so enabling them better to digest and relate to the material we teach. We also believe this will enrich the non-natives in the class. However, a gulf in understanding yawns before us, since we need them to tell us about their culture in our terms, using our cultural patterns and norms. The challenge can be most daunting.

4. General Approach

4.a Humour

A Trickster figure plays an important role in most native American sacred teachings, practices and in storytelling. "Jokes, puns, satire - these different forms of humour are important teaching tools," write Peggy Beck et al. in The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life (1990: 296). In both colleges many

participants told stories of how a humorous incident had helped them forge links with their native students. Here is one typical incident.

> One thing that I think won their confidence. It was a complete accident. They were huddled in their group. I had them working in groups and I was leaving their group, and said: "I'd just like to explain this to the rest of the family." I meant class, but I said family. Just a slip. They loved that. They thought it was wonderful. Hilariously funny for a start, and then I think making that mistake really made a difference with the way they saw me. I think some of them became more comfortable with me after that. A complete accident.

I heard many such stories as I interviewed teachers, all of these relating to, as one teacher put it, "breaking the ice." The slip of the tongue, or sandwich, or instrument created the humorous situation between teacher and student, often acting as a kind of catalyst:

> I had this Mohawk girl; she failed the course but took it again. She was very, very serious. I never saw her talking to other students...One day she was asking me something while I was eating and I dropped all my sandwich down me and it was the first time I saw her smile. Then we started talking...and that broke the ice, and then she became friendly with me and was always coming to ask me questions. And she did very well and passed the course.

4.b Sometimes the Time is not Right

While several teachers spoke of the importance of a warm, non-threatening classroom environment, and the opportunity humorous situations provided for breaking the ice, sometimes "the time is not right" whatever one does. This teacher told me how a student who could not perform one semester turned in a star performance the following semester.

> And she was obviously not having a good time of things. But I couldn't tell this from her face. The affect was always the same. The only way I picked up on it was that she was not completing the tasks she was supposed to be doing. And I spoke to her about it and she acknowledged she was not completing them, but couldn't tell me why not.

The teacher described an incident where the student did not perform a very simple task. Searching for an explanation, the teacher noticed that a graduate student who had worked in the North-West Territories had joined the native student; the student performed her assigned task while they talked. The teacher used this incident to demonstrate how something like homesickness perhaps kept this really good student from showing her capability. She failed the course.

But the next semester, the same teacher noticed this student performing an assigned task with ease and assurance. Something seemed to have prevented her from performing the same tasks the previous term even though she had been quite capable of doing so. Occasionally, teachers may worry that they should have done more, or acted differently, but sometimes the matter is out of their hands.

4.c Creating the Right Environment

Most teachers emphasized the importance of getting to know the native student. Their experience and feeling bear out strategies Barman et al. found in their research. These strategies can serve both native and non-native teachers.

> Successful teachers of Indian children, whether or not they are Indian, are characterized by their ability to create a climate of emotional warmth and to demand a high quality of academic work. They often take the role of personal friend, rather than that of impersonal professional, and use many nonverbal messages, frequently maintaining close body distance, touching to communicate warmth, and engaging in gentle teasing. After establishing positive interpersonal relationships at the beginning of the year, these teachers become demanding, as an aspect of their personal concern in a reciprocal obligation to further learning. Highly supportive of any attempt students make, these teachers avoid even minor forms of direct criticism. Thus, these teachers are effective because of their instructional and interactional style, and not because of their ethnic or racial group membership (1987a: 13).

One teacher had put these kinds of ideas in her own words during her interview: "I think it's important how you approach it....you have to show a little humanity, a little humour, a little cajoling." Another talks about her perception of how to "create the right environment" with native students:

> And she [the student] said "I'm coming back [to complete my DEC] " and I said, "I think that's terrific," and threw my arms around her and said, "I can't wait for you to graduate." I think they will open up to people that they eventually get through to. I'm sure a lot of it is me also learning how to not treat them distantly but to be warm and open to them.

Teachers who remarked on the importance of the class environment may be interested to know that they are confirming other people's experience. Reporting Kleinfeld's studies among the native people of Alaska in 1973, Kenneth Whyte, in his article, "Strategies for Teaching Indian and Métis Students" tells us that:

> What Kleinfeld reported was that Eskimo and Indian students talked more in class, got more right answers on teacher-prepared tests, and

> scored higher on IQ tests when the teacher used a personalized style, a warm personal approach communicated by non-verbal cues, and an interpersonal style congruent with the personalized social relationships of village communities.
>
> What is most interesting, the study showed that white students also talked more in class and got more right answers on teacher-prepared tests when the teacher used the warm personal approach (1986: 7).

This last comment relates back to the point many teachers made at the beginning of this chapter: that adjusting to their native students has made them better teachers for all their students.

CHAPTER VI. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Reading over the interviews of my John Abbott colleagues, I found various themes jumping off the page at me. Many mentioned the same topics and in very much the same, readily discernible, ways. In contrast, I puzzled long and hard over the transcripts of Heritage teachers. Fascinating, relevant, revealing as I found their comments, I could not decide for a long time how to categorize them. While doing the interviews, though, I had been aware that Heritage participants tended to include much more than their colleagues elsewhere what I refer to here as contextual elements. One of these contextual elements, I realized, had to do with the sheer numbers of native students.

1. Numbers Change Many Things

1.a Students Speak for Themselves

Several participants at Heritage College made the point that, as their numbers grew, the aboriginal students began to speak for themselves about their own needs. Their increased representation seems to bolster their confidence. This teacher remarked: "I find the native students now are becoming much more assertive...I'm noticing more and more native students in classes and they are more outgoing...They seem more comfortable."

Although we speak of "native" or "aboriginal" students as if they were one homogeneous group, we must keep reminding ourselves that this is not true. So even if we see more and more of them, it does not necessarily mean they know each other or share life experiences. The students themselves remind us constantly that they are Cree, or Inuit, or Algonkian, or Mohawk. And yet, even though they come from different nations, the presence of more aboriginal students generally helps make them feel more comfortable, as this teacher found:

> And it's this kind of feeling [supporting each other] amongst the students too; real support in numbers. And the interesting thing is, they didn't know each other before. They're not all from the same place. Some of them are Crees, some are Algonkian, some are from Maniwaki, some from Val d'Or.

The numbers of native students in Heritage means relations with native and non-native students are changing too. Pointing to this, one teacher observed: "Most of the time the native students tend to sit together and work together. Some students will work with the native students; some friendships are actually started. That wasn't the case before. I think the numbers are making a

difference. I think the visibility. I think also just getting to know more people who see that they're people, I think that's part of it."

As people move out of a marginalized state, they become more vocal. When aboriginal students represented a smaller percentage of the student body at Heritage they made few, if any, demands. Now, though, as their numbers grow, they appear to have recognized their right to speak out on issues important to them. This is how one participant put it:

> I think what's happening round here is just the numbers themselves have given the students a certain amount of power. And when the teachers now look around and begin to acknowledge that, my goodness, they do have mouths, they really can speak, the teachers have begun to enter into the process. The students are actually feeling the power and now they want to sit on committees, they want to speak out. We're giving them a voice here, a political voice.

1.b The Situation becomes More Urgent

Educational institutions act to pass on the values and traditions of a culture, and tend to be quite conservative. Oftentimes, entrenched interests or dyed-in-the-wool bureaucratic norms prevent innovative measures some participants see as absolutely necessary and even overdue. One teacher urged the importance of acting now to meet student needs:

> But I think in the last few years I've got impatient - it's time. And partly, I think people in the communities are saying it's time. So they're coming whether we're ready for them or not. It's not a case of our sitting here and saying well, what kind of programme can we devise that will entice aboriginal students to come here? Because in our case, they came and a very few were successful. Partly because a very few of us held their hands without making any waves about what we were doing or how it was happening. And they went back to their communities and said, try this place, you know. Then it began to grow very quickly. And then once the word goes out it grows geometrically, I think. And each one brings three.

The rate at which native students now attend college increases rapidly all the time, and this exponential increase, resulting from needs clearly felt by the aboriginal communities, makes some teachers impatient that colleges and colleagues do not effect what they see as necessary changes.

Several teachers pointed to one fact which highlights the importance of acting now: although Cree students have been attending the college for many years, few have graduated. More Algonkians than Cree have graduated, but only recently have the Cree themselves started to graduate. The provision of services

to aboriginal students, though, appears to have had very salutary effects: two Cree graduated in 1991; four in 1992; and eight to ten are expected to do so in 1993.

2. Other Elements

2.a The Importance of Counsellors

In his report on the programme established at the Cégep de Sept-Iles for its Innu students, Delagrave maintained the absolute necessity of a special counsellor for their aboriginal clientèle. Confirming this finding, teachers in both colleges voiced their unanimous support for special counsellors for aboriginal students: "There has to be somebody there, somebody that we can go to with problems. We can say, something happened with so and so. Can you find out?"

Not only is the special counsellor necessary for the students, I realized from all the comments, but also for the teachers: "I think [the counsellor's] a really important resource. She does have first-hand knowledge. She knows these kids. I sometimes run things by her before I try them. I also tell her when things go well."

While concurring on the necessity of such a person, a few participants voiced their concern that being sensitized to the needs of a particular group and asked to be aware of the differences, can "in some ways...almost freeze you up. God, let me do nothing harmful here." Having an intermediary between themselves and their students in fact irritated a few teachers. According to one participant, "at times that there's almost an over-dependency that has developed," where the teacher feels cut off from his students whose concerns are made known to him by the counsellor rather than by them directly.

Most others, though, had no reservations. This individual found an orientation session of great use to her in teaching a second group of Cree and wished she had been able to benefit from one before she had taught her first group.

> I wish I'd had a couple of hours chat with [the counsellors] before I had the Cree - it would have helped. But later, with another group, when I knew what I was up against, and I learned about them - it was fun. After that I could see how maybe I could help keep their interest and attendance and performance up to the point that I would succeed. But I needed that.

2.b Problems of Space

Most colleges now strain at the seams to accommodate far more students than originally intended. Both Heritage and John Abbott suffer a lack of space. This

problem leads to difficulties in procuring suitable office space for counsellors as well as meeting places (drop-in centres) for native students, generally acknowledged as an important need. In the startlingly constrained space of Heritage College - fortunately work has started on a new building - the native counsellor's office is part of the main lobby which she shares with the college nurse and vacates when the nurse visits. The native students have turned the area around her partitioned-off office into a common meeting place. When I first entered the college, I was immediately struck by the number of aboriginal students "hanging out" in the small main lobby.

Lack of space similarly dogs John Abbott, although nothing like to the extent of the present Heritage building. Here, though, late-comers have to move heaven and earth, and, perhaps with equal difficulty, entrenched colleagues and departmental territorial interests, for space. A committee exists as a forum in which territorial claims and counter-claims work themselves out, and stories circulate of space-related dramas. As a consequence of being a (relatively) new arrival, the James Bay Nursing Project counsellor now lodges - along with a small meeting room for students - in the Psychology Department. Her colleague finally found a small niche at the opposite end of the college. Meanwhile, the Kativik counsellor working with the Inuit students has no place to hang his hat and teachers wishing to contact him must leave phone messages in various places.

2.c Classes are Too Big

Other institutional constraints mentioned by many teachers which impede successful teaching of native (and other) students relate to the size of their classes and their struggle to deal with increasing workloads.

Many times I heard teachers complain that with the class sizes we have to deal with today - forty to forty-four students is the norm in many classes - they cannot deal adequately with any students. How can we give personalized teaching, learn the names of our students, and get to know them when there are so many in a class? Class sizes obviously present a serious obstacle to better teaching for all students. Some participants who have taught both smaller and larger classes have noticed how native students find it easier to participate in their smaller sections than in the larger classes they teach. The same observations holds, of course, for just about any other student. Classes of forty-odd students intimidate most people, including, at times, teachers!

Teachers struggling with large classes, many preparations and new material simply do not have the spare capacity to worry about a particular group of students. In this way, too, institutional norms affect our capacity as effective teachers of native (and non-native) students.

Those individuals who teach in a setting other than a formal classroom tend to mention quite different experiences with native students. The comments of one participant echo an element often discussed in relevant literature:

> The classroom is the problem...it's almost adversarial. You stand in front and talk and tell. You deliver and they accept. Probably the best thing is to have a new system or have them do projects on their own and come back and share. So you're working against that in this traditional setting.

3. Sources of Conflict

At John Abbott, native students, at under 1% of the regular student population, remain something of a curiosity whereas at Heritage native students count as 9% of the student population with every sign of increasingly rapidly. How to teach native students, what to teach them, how to accommodate them, and indeed, whether the college should make special efforts to accommodate them, have all emerged as momentous and quite divisive issues.

3.a Should there be a Special Programme?

Heritage College probably provides a good idea of what can happen in any institution when a visible minority starts to make up a considerable part of its clientèle. Unresolved issues do not necessarily unravel themselves with time alone; they merely grow underground and eventually emerge with a spring-like vigour.

Aboriginal students have been attending Heritage College in greater numbers than they have John Abbott College (which of course translate into greater proportions of the student body). This has gone on for over twelve years. Until very recently, there was no official recognition of this fact in terms of special programmes or services provided to aboriginal students. Dedicated teachers volunteered their time and efforts to act as mentors and counsellors for the students. Some years ago, one teacher, with the consent of the Administration, started teaching a special course for aboriginal students called Introduction to Social Science. When the college community learned of the existence of this course, I was told, many voiced their disapproval. The dispute revolved around whether the provision of such a course, and special services for aboriginal students, would "ghettoize" them rather than work to provide their special needs. Now, though, as of the past two years, there is more official recognition of the need to provide special services to native students. This teacher acknowledged that new openness while pointing to the lack of a coherent programme.

> So we've grown quickly but still basically without a really sound notion of where we're going or what we're doing. And no longer will this work: "We'll just fit them in and accommodate them." And it worked for a long time and you can do that with twenty with a lot of energy. But you can't do that with fifty or sixty. So now, as of last year, the college has acknowledged we do have aboriginal students here, about one-tenth of our school population, or one-ninth. And that we actually do need to have some kind of special services or some kinds of things that can assist these students. And that we need to be open about it for the first time.

At Heritage, native students form an important part of the college. While unhappy that it has taken so long, this participant applauds the moves recently taken to acknowledge this fact: "Certainly I think we're on the right track and our Board and Administration recognize that this is an important part of our college, and we need to set aside funds specifically allocated to native students for services for curriculum, for whatever."

The size of the college obviously plays a role in determining how and when conflicts arise. I say this because, at John Abbott, the same issues have arisen but tend to be dealt with on an individual basis. When a department harbours forty teachers, it is easier to place native students with those seen as "more sympathetic" than if there are only three or four teachers. The larger faculty body can avoid, for a while at least, arguments of "principle" by a judicious and pragmatic policy of steering native students towards particular teachers. At John Abbott, for the time being, issues which cause dissent at Heritage have tended to be dealt with at the individual level. Lately, however, some objections to the way in which students have been placed in classes have been dealt with at an institutional rather than individual level.

Teachers at John Abbott did not raise the question of whether or not anything special should be done for aboriginal students, in fact, all seemed to take that as a given. Instead their comments arose out of their experiences teaching aboriginal students in special programmes. It is also worth remarking that the Kativik programme, apparently soon to become the major source of native students, emphasizes the acquisition of second-language skills through "adjunct" classes where a teacher uses the material in one course to "drive" the English-second-language (ESL) class. As well, the Inuit students attend study skills sessions at present with their Kativik counsellor, but most likely these will also be given within the English Department next year. The sheer variety of core courses available, the teaching of ESL and remedial English at John Abbott, all play a role in minimizing some of the difficulties native students otherwise experience if placed in their first year in courses treating difficult material. Consequently a large college enjoys more strategies to deal with some potential sources of conflict.

3.b How and What to Teach Native Students

In the previous section dealing with strategies teachers employ, we saw that not all teachers agree on the necessity or even the desirability of changing their teaching methodology or course content to accommodate native students. Differences of opinion on these issues, particularly on course content, can become very heated. At Heritage College, as the aboriginal students themselves and members of the college community pressed for courses to include what they see as more relevant material, conflicts arose. Now, though, report diverse participants, changes to the curriculum are "happening in a very subtle, quiet way." One put it like this: "So it is happening but they would not have it happening in any formal way, nor would they care to acknowledge it's happening, but nevertheless, they've done it."

At John Abbott, there has been less pressure to change course content. I should add here, though, that the JBNP, in Goals of the Project (undated) states that part of its mandate is the "identification of areas where curriculum enrichment would be appropriate for the Nursing students preparing to nurse their people in the James Bay region, and determine the best way to offer these to the currently registered and future Nursing students." The Kativik approach relies heavily on ESL training to prepare Inuit students for insertion into the regular student body and has not broached questions of suitability of course content.

Unlike the Heritage students, John Abbott aboriginal students have not organized to demand changes themselves. Given all this, together with the availability of ESL courses, plus the size of the college and hence the variety of courses and teachers, the conflict over standards has not yet emerged in the same way at John Abbott as it has at Heritage. A couple of teachers did, however, refer to their concern over academic standards in "sheltered" courses (i.e. regular courses in a particular discipline, adapted and taught for ESL students).

Tensions have emerged at John Abbott College in a different way. Here, most native students are pre-registered, rather than going through the regular procedure, as are other students with particular needs. Given the way this operates, several teachers at John Abbott told me that they feel they have been designated as "sympathetic" or teaching more appropriate (for native students) course material and thus often find a very high number of native students in their classes. These teachers also felt they tend to be designated by those involved in pre-registration as the most sympathetic, or caring, and also most appropriate teachers for students with various handicaps: the physically disabled and those with learning disabilities. Thus, in John Abbott we appear to see a trend starting where certain teachers teach classes in which a large proportion, if not the majority of the students are in some way different from mainstream students. So these teachers teach the most challenging classes, in terms of student clientele. The irony of this situation is not lost on these

individuals who see their "empathetic" teaching style as resulting in a more demanding teaching task.

3.c Philosophy Of Education: What is the College's Mission?

In both institutions, different images of the college's mission and different philosophies of education collide, and appear likely to clash for some time yet. A teacher who could be speaking of either of the two colleges, commented on these divisions: "We have a faculty that's not very united in terms of its philosophy and vision of education...There are those that hold very tightly to the view that we can just provide a classical education to white students."

The past twenty years or so have seen many changes in post-secondary educational institutions. Many of these changes came about as a result of pressure from minority groups who charged that these institutions systematically excluded them. Many women have decried the paucity of high-level positions held by women, charging that universities and colleges have been dominated by an exclusionist ideology. Women and blacks come to mind as two important minority groups which have demanded changes to curriculum, course content, and teaching methodologies. Few teachers can claim to be non-partisan regarding such issues. Two camps tend to develop. When a sufficient number of aboriginal students press for a recognition of their presence, division is to be expected. The comments of this participant reflect that division, where: "[Other teachers] tend to see things differently from [us]. They have a whole different way of looking at issues. A whole different philosophy behind their assumptions...The way this group thinks is not the way we see things, philosophically, or ethically."

Underlying so much of the debate about native students, are very different philosophies about what the role of college education is. Teachers who discuss the needs of aboriginal students almost inevitably see this subject as spilling over into the larger topic of adjusting to the changing composition of the classroom.

> I don't think [native students] can just be mainstreamed, partly because there's too much wrong with the mainstream. I think if we don't mainstream aboriginal students, all students benefit. It becomes a more accessible place, a more egalitarian form of education, less elitist...I think if we have an open-door policy of letting everyone into our college, we have an obligation to make sure that a good proportion of them is getting out the other end and we have to provide services for that to happen. That's not just for aboriginal students.

To recap briefly: since teachers operate in an institutional context, important institutional factors have a bearing on the topic of teaching native students. Emerging as a particularly important need was the urgency of providing services

to a fast-growing aboriginal student body. Coupled with this, teachers recognized the utmost importance of having special counsellors for those students. Also, teachers pointed to the sources of conflicts liable to arise in their colleges as the student population changes, reflecting a more multicultural society.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

No one can write a manual on the "correct methodology for teaching native students" repeated several of my colleagues. Even if people do share a common culture, they remain individuals; and, of course, native peoples come from several different cultures.

That being said, however, many participants offered suggestions on the subject of what could help teachers of native students in the future apart from what has already been enunciated here. A few pointed to the need for ensuring that students be correctly placed; this presupposes the existence of remedial classes. Others directed their comments to the importance of making the classroom or class-setting a comfortable place. To an extent, teachers can do this by approaching students in a particular way, premised on an increased awareness and acceptance of the range of different behaviour in particular circumstances. This teacher has realized his expectations must change:

> We teach by giving a statement or showing a skill, and students react, then we react to their reaction. It's the whole process. And it's the reaction time, or the method of reaction that's a little different with native students.

Not singling out native students, not pointing them out, not putting them on the spot came through as a theme from many participants.

> So I'd say basically try and find out a little about them right away, try and find out what they would sort of like to get out of any given course. Try and get some kind of inside feeling. Don't impose too much too soon. Don't single them out.

In this vein, another suggestion emerged: when possible, putting the class in a circle "so that people are a little bit more visible and...we can encourage everybody to feel part of the class."

When native students "hang around" at the back of the classroom after class, they expect, and hope, the teacher recognizes that they are expressing a need. Many teachers, used to more overt calls for help, do not recognize the signals native students send, let alone know what native students expect of them. In one of the lunches for aboriginal students which I attended at Heritage College, a student said: "We like it when teachers come to us and ask us how things are going."

A good guide for teachers, possibly confused by the apparent lack of response of native students in class, is their attendance. As long as they keep turning up,

they are interested in the class. Class attendance, several participants noted, is an important litmus test to bear in mind.

In both colleges, several teachers spoke of the importance of a warm, non-threatening classroom environment. This science teacher maintained that it was necessary to create "a very warm environment." He added, "because there are topics...which I would say are hard. But I believe you can teach anything, the hardest thing, in a very friendly environment."

But for the students to feel comfortable, the teachers must feel comfortable, too, one participant pointed out, "I think you have to really like them - it's a personal thing." She explained, feeling comfortable with them is important, because: "They can feel if you feel comfortable with them. Now that's the whole problem...and I think that's hard if you've never had contact with other cultures."

Teachers who insist on the need to be friendly with native students, and to create a good class environment have discovered for themselves something which Dr. Kleinfeld found out in her study. As Sawyer reports, Kleinfeld concluded that the most effective teachers of native students shared two major characteristics. One was personal warmth, as opposed to professional distance, and the other was a quality of "active demandingness: as opposed to a passive understanding. Learning is more an interpersonal experience for native than non-native students who tend to see it as goal-oriented and impersonal. It is important, though, for the teacher to be actively demanding otherwise students who have had bad school experiences and with low self-esteem may not work to their capacity" (Sawyer, 1991: 101).

A participant put these kinds of ideas in her own words, emphasizing that we should not be led into thinking that any one particular teaching style suits all native students, just as one style does not suit all non-native students.

> I think it all comes down to being able to communicate really well with people. Not to talk down to them, to tell them, "Okay, I understand that some of the things I say, you may not be understanding, so I will explain some things"...I think you can use a whole variety of teaching methodology with all these students. It's probably very radical, but to me it's just common sense...I'm almost convinced that it's your own personality that makes the difference. I see that all the time with these...students. They will take the hardest course, and if the teacher is understanding, and uses examples, and is not pompous, they will do all right in that course.

As I listened to this remark, I remembered a phrase I came across while reviewing the literature in order to write my research proposal. Kleinfeld et al. referred to this passage by Kleibard:

> We might as well face the likelihood that teaching may not consist of standard best ways to do particular things. Being a good teacher, like being a good statesman or a good mother, may involve infinite possible human excellences and appropriate behaviors, no one much more a guarantor of success than the others (1983: 237).

These words, and my belief in the value of "Teachers' Tales," impelled me to embark on this study of collecting the stories of teachers of native students in the two English-language colleges most involved in this activity in Québec.

I believe that the stories gathered here reflect an important part of the store of knowledge of the teachers of those two colleges. And I hope that by collecting and reporting them, I have contributed to the ever-turning wheel of our shared experience. In concluding by arriving at the beginning of my journey, or close thereto, I should like to acknowledge something of what I have learned from my contacts with people of the first nations.

> At the root of Native American aboriginal concepts is the belief that the road conveys an eternal return. There is no end....The place from which you had started at the beginning seemingly a long time ago, will now appear very close as if you had started but recently (Radin in Beck, 1990: 189).

Indians, it has been said, think in circles whereas white people think in squares. I should like to think that this particular square has some kind of rounding at the corners. I have tried not to turn this project into a linear progression of analytical thoughts marching towards an irrevocable conclusion. I should like to believe that I have spun something of a web of the many tales teachers told me. I hope that - like the webs of Dream catchers - this particular web will catch and keep the reader's good thoughts!

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APPENDIX. RESEARCH METHODS

1. The "Teacher Tale"

The purpose of the study, to collect descriptions of particular teaching situations faced by teachers of native students, and the techniques and strategies they have used to increase their effectiveness with these students, dictated the research method. That method is "naturalistic" rather than "experimental".

Forced to choose a category into which this research best fits, my response would be that it most closely resembles certain ethnographic studies, and my role that of a participant observer. I embarked on this study with no important hypotheses to test. My agenda was to discover what teachers of native students had to say on the subject.

Underlying this approach stands the belief that teaching is more of an art than a science. Kleinfeld et al. concur. They go on to say that the most effective studies on how to teach are those that sensitize teachers. Such studies provoke thought and debate among teachers about what they are doing, why, and whether or not they are being effective. Kleinfeld et al. agree and write: "In our experience, it is the concrete cases describing particular teaching problems, not the generalizations about teacher characteristics, that teachers find interesting, that lead them to reflect critically." (1983: 102)

The teacher tale has a number of things to recommend it as a means of systematizing knowledge about teaching. First, it provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect critically on their teaching experiences and confirm or contrast their perceptions and assessments with those of others. Second, "tales" stay vividly in the memory and thus are more likely to influence teaching than conventional "research findings," which are often remote, abstract and forgettable. Third, teachers enjoy this kind of exchange rather than react to it in a hostile manner, as many do to the very idea of "research on teaching." The stories put teachers in the position of "researcher" rather than "researched," as they try to make meaning out of their collective experiences (Kleinfeld et al., 1983: 104). Thus it is a powerful tool for the creation of collective knowledge.

Of course, there are limitations to the use of the "teacher tale." But none of these limitations reduces the importance of this approach in helping teachers search for new methods of facing real every-day situations. Its generalizability is not meant to be universal. The lessons to be drawn from a tale depend upon the experience and assumptions of the listener as much as on the tale told. Sometimes a compelling story reflects a situation that is indeed unique.

Nevertheless, the fact of knowing that others have faced similar situations, come across similar reactions, or lack of reaction, relieves the teacher of some anxiety, of a feeling if isolation, of being "the only one" who faces a situation she or he perceives as difficult. As well, teachers use this technique all the time amongst themselves. They exchange ideas on what they are doing in the classroom and with their course content, so they can repeat successful techniques.

How true are these tales? Harry Wolcott in "On Seeking - and Rejecting - Validity in Qualitative Research," argues that: "Validity serves most often as a gloss for scientific accuracy among those who identify closely with science and for correctness or credibility among those who do not (1990: 126). Addressing the issue of validity, he quotes Geertz as saying, "To get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion...that you are not quite getting it right." Wolcott agrees with this, as indeed do I. However, I also concur with Wolcott when he asserts: "But I also go to considerable pains not to get it all wrong." (1990: 127) Included in the "considerable pains" I myself took are such techniques as: recording accurately; presenting lots of data so readers can see for themselves what was said; and including data that somehow does not fit.

As Kleinfeld et al. point out, the "teacher tale" method has much in common with techniques which have a long and honorable history in the fields of law and business. In these fields, much importance is placed on the study of individual cases. This method has shown its value in providing administrators and lawyers with training in their fields. In fact, the Harvard Business School uses such a method. Such a technique can be used in teacher education, too, believe Kleinfeld et al. After embarking on an ambitious project to determine the most effective teachers in rural Alaskan communities, they arrived at the conclusion that the "teacher tale" offered the most promise as a heuristic model for teachers.

2. The Participants

2.a John Abbott College

The advisors of the Cree and Inuit programmes provided me with lists of teachers who have taught Cree and Inuit students in the established programmes. I sent a letter to all teachers who had been identified as having taught three or more aboriginal students; there was, however, some doubt as to how correct these identifications could be, since data are not normally collated for this kind of use. I used the arbitrary measure of three students in the belief that these teachers would be more likely to have stories to tell. From these forty-seven, I received twenty-one responses. Of these, only one teacher refused to participate, citing his lack of experience with native students. Of the twenty who volunteered to participate, I interviewed all but three, with whom I was not able to fix an interview time because of timetable clashes and busy schedules. As the school year progressed, some of the teachers who had not initially responded

volunteered to participate. Consequently, I conducted a total of twenty-three interviews at John Abbott.

2.b Heritage College

With the consent of the Academic Dean, I asked the Counsellor to distribute a letter explaining the project and solliciting volunteers. Native students have been attending Heritage College in some numbers for over twelve years. Consequently, teachers in particular disciplines have far more experience than those at John Abbott College in teaching native students. Here, the Counsellor sent my letter to thirteen teachers whose experience ranged from fifteen years of teaching aboriginal students to two years. I interviewed all nine volunteers.

3. Interview Strategy

All but two of the interviews were conducted in the fall semester of 1992. In John Abbott College, these could be carried out in the privacy and relative comfort of my office. In Heritage College, due to a dire lack of space, all kinds of ad hoc arrangements had to be made so that a couple of interviews were interrupted by the need to pick up and move, or by the teacher's having to go and teach.

The interview protocol followed a conversational, narrative style rather than one of questions and answers. Such a style is more likely than structured interviews to elicit the stories sought for here. The job of the interviewer in this kind of research is not to take the lead, but to enable the participants to reflect upon and communicate that which they feel important and relevant. I began all interviews by explaining my project to the participants again and listening to any of their comments on it. Next I sought factual information on their experience teaching aboriginal students: how long they had been doing it, what subjects they taught and so on. I proceeded by asking them to tell me whatever they had noticed and believed relevant to this study. I sustained interviews by referring to some common hypotheses about native students e.g. that they do not give eye contact etc. and asking if participants had noticed any similar behaviour. As well, in later interviews, I asked some participants how they reacted to some of the comments other teachers had made in their interviews e.g. that students "faded into the walls."

4. Analysis of Data

Interviews were recorded and verbatim transcripts were prepared from the tapes by a typist. Initially, I treated the transcripts from each college separately since each has a different history, experience, clientèle and institutional setting. After reading through the transcripts for one college several times, I went through them again, marking those passages which I felt to be of particular importance.

As I did so, various possible themes began to emerge as categories into which the data could be sorted. I then went through the transcripts again, designating passages to particular categories. If a passage I had previously marked as of importance did not fit an existing category, I made a new one for it.

Next I made up a category sheet for each teacher, which collected by category all those passages marked as important in his/her transcript. I used these individual teacher sheets to produce a new list which sorted by category. Now I had a category e.g. "Quiet," with all that teachers had said on this topic listed beneath it. I followed this procedure for all interviews in both colleges. In the final stage, I amalgamated the data under each category.

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